

The Art of Jane Logemann: A Meaningful Merger of Language and Abstraction
Elinor M. Richter, 2004

To walk into Jane Logemann's Noho studio in New York City is to comprehend immediately the multitude of sources that have formed and influenced her art for the past four decades. On the wall by the doorway there are three postcards of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (The Hague: Mauritshuis), fondly remembered from the copy that hung in her parents' home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Jane (b. 1942) grew up with her two brothers. While the reproductions are identical in form, they vary in color and in hue – a reminder that Logemann's current works are extremely sensitive to subtly changing nuances of light and tone.

There is another postcard of one of Jasper Johns' gestural paintings, *Dancers on a Plane* (London: Tate Modern, 1980-1981). The two artists have known each other since the early 1970s; Johns' studio, *The Bank*, on Houston Street was nearby Logemann's studio on First Avenue and First Street. Logemann's early paintings are large-scale, pure abstractions that are an integral part of the modernist mainstream.

As one continues the tour of her personal space, one comes across colored charts of the alphabets of five different languages: Arabic, Russian, Korean, Japanese, and of course Hebrew. The large-scale letters, set against bold blocks of color, are similar to those found in school rooms across the world. Since the early 1980s, Logemann has admitted words and letters (instead of marks) into her abstract creations, thus striking out in a new and perhaps even more universal direction. One does not need to be a polyglot to comprehend the artistry of the shapes and colors of these letters with their slashes, loops and curls. In a similar vein, the daring swirling brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy are appreciated by Western audiences in terms of their form rather than content. Color and form appeal on an intimate and personal level to be shared between artist and viewer.

Nearby are personal items that Logemann has collected over the years. Consisting of finds lovingly gathered from tag sales and thrift shops, they include both Chinese and Japanese landscape paintings and woodcuts. As with Asian artists, Logemann has the ability to simultaneously discern both the microcosm and the macrocosm. In a similar manner, Logemann applies her marks with modesty and restraint, drawing the viewer quietly into her sensitive, intimate world.

One of the most formative influences of Logemann's life was her mother, a school teacher who retired from her profession to raise her three children. The artist has saved some of her mother's early lesson plans; their repetition of letters, designed with child-like simplicity and symmetry, is reflected in Logemann's recent pictures using various alphabets, what she calls her language works. Her mother no doubt inspired Logemann's love of literacy. Her grandfather was a violinist for the Milwaukee Symphony. Jane's insistence on repetition and her early admiration for the works of Paul Klee (known for his wit, musicality and lightness of mark) have their roots, in part, in her early family experiences. The artist attended the Layton School of Art and received her B.A. from the University of Wisconsin before moving to Aspen in 1963, where she began to paint small abstract landscapes. Since that time, Logemann's art has always been rooted in the forms of nature (witness today her works *Light-French*, *Sky-Japanese*, *Hibiscus-Hebrew* and the *Plagues*). While in Colorado she met fellow artist James Rosenquist, who prompted her move to New York.

Rosenquist's large-field works perhaps encouraged Logemann to experiment on a grander scale. Over the next few years she would produce wall murals as wide as 15 to 20 feet. In 1966 she developed a methodological approach to painting that involved drawing (or "writing") with brush on canvas, a practice that she still adheres to today. Referred to as her "loop structure" paintings, she created a network of loops that move across the canvas from right to left (curiously anticipating her current Hebrew language works). "The paintings at the beginning were tiny loops of one color connecting and placed on top of a ground color. The size of my canvas became larger as I continued this

process and began grading colors as in the rainbow.”¹ The “microscopic” modular unit of the loop (the first of many such units by the artist designed for repetition) was thus magnified on a large scale. Typical of this approach is her *Untitled* painting (Austin: University of Texas, James Michener Collection, 1969). The diptych, which features a dark brown ground overlaid with an accumulation of burnt sienna, has antecedents in the works of Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, both of whom in the early 1950s attempted to simplify their palette by adhering to a single color, thereby creating a unitary spatial field; in Reinhardt’s case, the color was usually black. Only upon closer inspection does the seemingly opaque surface reveal slight visual patterns. In *Untitled*, the surface is eroded by an irregular pattern of flowing loops. The subtle gradations of the color field serves to draw the viewer’s eye into experiencing a sense of limitless depth. The gentle, looping forms of *Ocean* (collection of the artist, 1970) suggest the movement of the sea as seen from above; its subtle gradations of blue have a mesmerizing and calming effect while the unbroken use of a single color conveys the vastness of nature (**Fig. 1**). These effects are never pre-conceived but instead relate to the spontaneous movement of the artist’s hand and the natural flow of the loops.

Logemann’s “loop structures” created from gradations of color would inspire her to produce several prints in the early 1970s published by Multiples/Marian Goodman, which has also published the printwork of John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman and Barnett Newman. She likewise exhibited her “Loop Structures” at the 470 Gallery in Boston (1972) and the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York City, where in both instances she was part of prestigious group shows. Her first solo exhibition was held in December of that same year at the Courtney Sale Gallery in Dallas, Texas. In 1972 she began a friendship with Sol LeWitt, whose Conceptualist sculptures and drawings based on mechanized modular grids would serve to reinforce Logemann’s own thinking. LeWitt would later play a pivotal role in the decision to exhibit the ten-part *Kaddish* (1995) as part of the inauguration of the new synagogue Congregation Beth Shalom Rodfe Zedek (Chester, CT), as well as introducing Logemann to Irene Barberis to form two-thirds of the nucleus of the present show, *Intersections*.

¹ Jane Logemann, lecture at the San Diego Center of Jewish Culture, La Jolla, CA, August 2000.

The artist ended her experiments with the “loop structure” in 1975 with the publication of a small edition of an artist’s book entitled: *Jane Logemann* (New York: Guggenheim and Whitney Museums; and Stanford: University Museum of Art). Even before 1975 the artist had changed directions. It began with a cross-country move to Santa Monica, California, and the start of a new relationship with her soon-to-be husband, Gerald Rosen. While continuing her painting, Logemann also took up video art.

In her videos Logemann takes her art outside her studio walls and begins to work under extreme conditions. *Freezer Tape* (b/w, 12 min., 1973) documents the act of drawing the word “radical” in columns, repeated over and over again, on the concrete walls of a commercial freezer. It ends when the artist, numbed by the sub-zero temperature, emerges into the daylight. The desert heat was a natural corollary to the teeth-chattering cold of the freezer. In *Desert Tape I and II* (b/w, 12 min., 1973), the working surfaces are now concrete and glass. Again, the artist uses columnar repetition; this time the word “concrete” is etched on the actual surface of that same substance with a coinciding sheet of glass on which is written the word “abstract.” For the first time in Logemann’s career, the modular unit and language have come together. *Drawing: Right to Left* (b/w, 10 min., 1974) depicts the artist in the act of executing her characteristic “loop” on glass in her usual left-handed fashion, which appears in reverse to the viewer as the glass is placed between the artist and the camera. The film was shown at the Long Beach Museum in California. *Eye Contact* (b/w, 17 min., 1975) and *Ant* (b/w. 5 min., 1975) both examine the bilateral symmetry of insects on a microscopic scale. In all these films, Logemann attempts to push and expand the very boundaries of the drawing medium.

In 1976 the artist returned to New York. Gradually the “loops” began to morph into other forms. In her *Circles: White on Purple Ink* (collection of the artist, 1979), the loops become airy, ethereal, continuous circles which later assume a variety of amorphous, amoebia-like forms, abstract yet ultimately related to nature (**Fig. 2**). Cell-like shapes begin to permeate her work; now connected they fill the paper or canvas. Chaos and organization coexist. Starting out on a small scale, as if viewed under a microscope, the forms gradually began to increase in size. In conjunction with the new largeness in scale

came a new feel for color and texture. “This was a turning point, when color and texture became of primary importance. In 1981... the loops became large abstract verticals looking like body parts or tree trunks. This worked into landscapes...”²

In the late 1970s the artist became interested in the visual tools of other cultures. Logemann began to make several trips to the Yucatán, where she discovered Mayan art and writing, the latter consisting of pictorial glyphs or units. These glyphs are the mysterious clues to the Mayan language; when grouped in sequence they form complex guides to their cultural systems. Her pastels *Tikal*, *Palenque*, *Yaxchilan* (all named after Mayan districts and sites) resemble rubbings (**Fig. 3**). Logemann reacts instinctively to the shapes; everything dealing with language at this point is purely visual.

Jane Logemann’s language works, the focus of this exhibition, should be viewed as a natural outgrowth of her work with abstraction. The reiteration of letters, words or phrases are the linguistic equivalents of her earlier modular units. She began her experimentation with Hebrew but soon expanded her repertoire to include Japanese, Korean, Russian, French, and Arabic. Each language resonates with its own internal meaning and nuances, just as her abstract work is imbued with an emotional response. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, calligraphy remains the highest form of art.

It was natural that the artist started her language work with Hebrew, as Jews are the “People of the Book.”³ Her first, one-of-a-kind *Hebrew Book* (collection of the artist) was produced to celebrate her son’s Bar Mitzvah in 1989 (**Fig. 4**). It contained his Torah segment, written both in Hebrew and English, and the Ten Commandments along with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph-bet*). The repetition and the discipline were inspired by the rhythmic chanting of her son as he intoned his Torah portion. It is at once personal and universal. Logemann, who played the piano as a child, has noted that “to be able to read a musical note is the same thing as writing in another language.”⁴

² Logemann, lecture at the San Diego Center of Jewish Culture, 2000.

³ Ori Soltes, “Jane Logemann and Letters/Words/Ideas,” *Mysticism in Jewish Art*. New York: B’Nai B’rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, 1996, 21.

⁴ Jane Logemann, conversation with the author, August 2004.

Two years later, she completed her *Hebraic-Arabic Alphabet*, a unique artist's book that is now in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York (**Fig. 5**). Conceived with all the preciousness of an illuminated medieval Book of Hours, it is written with India ink on vellum and boxed in dark linen. Each page is divided vertically with one half devoted to the Hebrew alphabet and the other to its Arabic counterpart. "Both Hebrew and Arabic are ancient languages steeped in philosophical and religious traditions, and [are] especially linked to the *Torah* and the *Koran*."⁵ Both languages are simultaneously contemporary and rooted in ancient traditions. They coexist on either side of the page – a veritable lesson for the on-going peace process in the Middle East – and their commonality, both visually (long curving strokes combined with short serifs and dots) and geographically, is greater than their differences. Varying vaporous, lightly colored washes have been painstakingly applied to create a visual sensation that is opaque and translucent, textural and smooth, three-dimensional and flat—a veritable tapestry woven with color and form. The result is a radiance that reverberates across the page, reminiscent of the metal-and-jeweled bindings of medieval manuscripts or elaborate *Torah* coverings. One experiences these books on a multi-sensorial level; the visual experience is related to the sheer tactile pleasure that derives from holding these exquisite books and turning their pages made from the most expensive of materials: vellum, brown Japanese paper, natural linen, muslin, or fine parchment.

Her *Hebrew-Russian Book* (collection of the artist, 1994) is more complex (**Fig. 6**). Once again the page is divided with Hebrew letters repeated in vertical columns on the left and the corresponding Russian letter on the right. The pages of repeated patterns of letters, however, are interrupted at irregular intervals by a prayer, in both Hebrew and English, or a poem, in Cyrillic Russian and English. The collection of Russian poets includes Alexander Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Marina Tsvetaeva, their commonality, save for Pushkin, being their suffering under Stalinism.⁶ The last word in the book is *manna*, which literally means food but can also be taken to mean "food for the spirit." Each word carries weight, but each can be read simply as an abstract formula or design. As such, the words or letters become universal emblems that traverse the

⁵ Jane Logemann, "Notes on a Hebraic-Arabic Alphabet," Archive of the Jewish Museum, 1993.

⁶ Logemann made a point of searching out female authors to address the traditional gender bias.

boundaries between cultures. The interplay of poetry, hieroglyphics, calligraphy and language is truly universal.

Cross-culturalism is evident in her *Japanese-Korean Alphabet* (collection of the artist, 1994, **Fig. 7**). The Japanese must learn three forms of writing: the *kanji* characters or ideographs, which are used to represent words of Chinese origin; the *hiragana*, which is used to represent native elements and especially those of a grammatical kind (the symbols are curvilinear); and the *katakana* signs, which are used principally for transcription of foreign-derived words (and whose symbols are made up of straight lines). As complicated as this appears, in Japanese writing less than 2,000 characters are used overall (1,850 are kanji), whereas Chinese calligraphers use about 4,000-5,000 characters. Logemann is interested in the linear aspects of hiragana script with its combination of curved and straight characters. The potential for visually complex, abstract linear patterns is almost limitless as Japanese is read both up and down and across; the permutations are indeed artistically endless. The left page is devoted to two Japanese characters while the right page depicts one Korean letter. Native Korean letters (a set of 28 altogether, but with only 24 in common use) are based on mathematical grids (an alphabetical chart), which relates to Logemann's continued interest in modular units.⁷

Logemann's vocabulary is "geared more to the particular visual qualities of the word and not so much its literal meaning. I choose words that have intuitive poetic associations for me visually."⁸ The selection of words is also determined by how they feel to her pen. *Plum-Korean* (collection of the artist, 2003), written on canvas and framed under glass as if it were paper, is covered by a luminous purple wash (**Fig. 8**). The work conveys Logemann's "idea of what a plum looks like – the color, the texture."⁹ *Hibiscus-Hebrew* (collection of the artist, 1995), seems to vibrate from under a vaporous haze of pink evoking both the color and the scent of the flower (**Fig. 9**). Every careful choice of color is designed to evoke a subjective response from the viewer. *Cornflower-French*

⁷ Special thanks to Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, who supplied specifics concerning the Japanese and Korean alphabets.

⁸ Jane Logemann, inaugural speech for her solo exhibition at the French Embassy, Washington, D.C., November 2, 2003.

⁹ Jane Logemann, conversation with the author.

(collection of the artist, 2003) conjures up the rich colors and fresh smells of Provence (**Fig. 10**). The visual and the linguistic are thus evoked simultaneously.

Commencing in 1994, Logemann began an ongoing series that involved two languages on one sheet. Sometimes the words relate to one another across different alphabets, such as *Land-Japanese* and *Desert-Korean* (1994); *Bud-Japanese* and *Tree-Hebrew* (2002); *River-Japanese* and *River-Arabic* (1994); while at other times, *Gate-Japanese* and *Letter-Hebrew* (2001), viewers must make their own visual and poetic connections (**Figs. 11-14**). Placed in unusual juxtaposition with one another these words offer meanings that take on a new context apart from their ordinary usage. All these works are done in black ink and watercolor on black German etch paper. The end result conveys both fusion and variety. More complex still is her *Border-Japanese, Hebrew, Russian, French, Arabic and Korean* (2003) specially designed for her exhibition at the French cultural embassy in Washington (**Fig. 15**). The word “border,” spelled out in various languages, is set against washes of green and beige that are evocative of nature; words and tones overlap one another reminding the viewer of the fluidity of modern-day frontiers, many of which are arbitrary and artificial. In referring to *Border*, Logemann states: “The color is an element just like the earth, air, sunlight, trees and plants. I attempt to reach across the borders of languages and lands. Art crosses over all borders.”¹⁰

Logemann expanded her language works when she created a ten-panel piece illustrating the *Kaddish* (collection of the artist, 1995, **Fig. 16**). The choice of the number ten was intuitive (as it relies on mathematical symmetry), but it could call to mind the Ten Commandments. It represents the culmination of a natural progression from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the single letter of the alphabet to the formation of words, and finally to the recreation of a complete text. To date, this was Logemann’s largest language work, with each panel measuring 31” x 22”.

The *Kaddish* is the traditional prayer for the dead. “At the time I began this idea, I was in the center of a personal tragedy in our family. I was dealing with that fact along with

¹⁰ Jane Logemann, speech at French Embassy.

digesting the possibility of using the *Kaddish* as a memorial for that relative.”¹¹ Written in India ink and overlaid with wash on unstretched muslin that suggests ancient biblical scrolls, the text of the prayer is written in Aramaic set against an ever-blackening field as one reads from right to left. The repetitious nature of the prayer is echoed by its circular framework, which suggests an ongoing process or continuity: life, death and rebirth, the natural order of the world. Ori Soltes has stated, “The circle, without beginning or end, bespeaks the notion of continuum, which is an essential idea of the *Kaddish* both as a mourner’s prayer and as an affirmation of God’s goodness and greatness.”¹² The placement of the circle varies within the rectangular field—it is in the middle for only the fifth and the final panel—but in all ten, it stretches to the periphery of the frame. “Here the geometric form suggests wholeness, the infinite, as well as the unknowable.”¹³ In addition, a horizontal band bisects each circle containing the prayer transliterated into English (this time a contrapuntal movement is created from left to right). The reiterated letters and words have a comforting, almost mesmerizing effect similar to that of *dovening* or the recitation of spiritual mantras. The surrounding field contains the Hebrew alphabet, each panel beginning with a different letter but ultimately including the entire alphabet, written in varying tones from almost pure white to inky black. The subtle hues suggest “the sadness of death and glimmers of hope, as well as the original void and darkness out of which the universe was formed.”¹⁴

The *Kaddish* was followed by the *Plagues* in 2003 (collection of the artist, **Figs. 17-26**). This series has the same authoritative intensity as the former, but it is also deeply rooted in nature like many of Logemann’s earlier works. It represents a visual as opposed to a mystical experience. The ten plagues that afflicted Egypt are described in Exodus 7-12. They were the result of divine retribution that culminated in the celebration of Passover and the freedom of the Jews from bondage. Each panel, measuring 43” x 27”, is painted in India ink and oil on muslin. Each affliction is represented as a single word, reiterated over and over again. Logemann’s characteristic repeated modular unit is perfect for conveying the enormity of each hardship: *Blood, Frogs, Lice, Pestilence, Beasts, Boils,*

¹¹ Jane Logemann, “On the *Kaddish*.”

¹² Ori Soltes, *Mysticism in Jewish Art*, 24.

¹³ Susan Chevlowe, “Jane Logemann: *Kaddish* and Recent Work. New York: UJA-Federation, 1999.

¹⁴ Ruth Bass, *Jane Logemann: Kaddish and New Work*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Museum of Judaica, 1996).

Hail, Locusts, Darkness, and finally *Death of the First Born*.¹⁵ Her irregular, agitated script conveys the movement of swarms of insects or the pounding of hailstones. “The connection between God’s words directed against Pharoah and the Divine’s commands instructing Moses, on the one hand, and the manifestation of God’s power in nature, on the other, is made evident by the openended use of the names of the plagues. In addition, her representation of each of the plagues in this vein gives added power to the enumeration of the plagues which takes place at the Passover Seder.”¹⁶ Although they were painted in a random order, the artist’s subconscious search for inherent symmetry resulted in the first and final plague being set against a blood-red ground.

Color is an especially important element of the series. Some choices were obvious, such as green for *Frogs* and a sickly yellow for *Boils*. *Beasts* is set against raw umber, while *Locusts* was rendered in burnt umber. *Lice* is almost a pure white, whereas *Hail* is a “cold gray.” *Darkness* cannot be too dark in order to read the “rivers of letters.”¹⁷ For Logemann, the hardest color to conceive was the background for *Pestilence*; she finally arrived at a chilling grayish purple.

In conjunction with her current language work, Logemann continues to expand her forays into complete abstraction. A sequence of intimate abstract works, drawn on black German etch paper, represent an on-going fascination since the 1990s. Mysteriously entitled—*GB, Y, B, and J*—they are based on the artist’s characteristic microlinear, module units (ranging from seven to twelve colors), but this time incorporating greater nuance, chance and mistakes (**Figs. 27-30**). They are as significant and integral to her *oeuvre* as *Border V*, which measures 6 ½’ x 5’ (collection of the artist, 1995, **Fig. 31**). *Border V*, again part of a cycle, is an explosion of shardlike pieces of colored tesserae reminiscent of the great shimmering Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna or confetti-strewed tables after a gala New Year’s party. Inspired by Seurat’s pointillist works, each brushstroke contains a dab of a different, unmodulated color. The strokes are arranged in

¹⁵ As her principal source for the plagues, Logemann consulted W. Gunter Plaut, ed. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 434-54.

¹⁶ Rabbi Norman Cohen, Hebrew Union College, New York, private correspondence with the author, September 24, 2004.

¹⁷ Jane Logemann, conversation with the author, July 2004.

a pattern that proceeds from right to left before moving up and down. Densely packed, the strokes suddenly open up to reveal a series of changing, kaleidoscopic patterns that dazzle the eye.

At once literate and abstract, embedded in Jewish tradition and yet secular, the art of Jane Logemann transcends definition. Hers is an art that is truly universal and, in her quiet and intimate way, represents a meaningful merger of language and abstraction.

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