

ESSEX FLOWERS

19 Monroe St
New York, NY 10002



Image Caption: (Left) AI generated using the prompt “alphabet soup.” Credit: *craiyon.com*.

(Right) Herbig-Haro 46/47 (actively forming stars) that seem to form the shape of a question mark
(Image captured by the James Webb Space Telescope) Credit: *NASA, ESA, CSA*.

Alphabet Soup curated by *E.E. Ikeler*

Featuring works by *Raque Ford, Rebecca Watson Horn, Lauren Anaïs Hussey, Blake O’Brien, Alyse Ronayne, Sarah Tortora and Ken Weathersby*.

Saturday, November 11 - Sunday, December 10, 2023

Opening Reception: Friday, November 10 6-8pm

“With a characteristic flourish of perversity linking painting to pasta, Martin Kippenberger identified the most important problem to be addressed on canvas since Warhol in an interview of 1990–91: ‘Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important! Even spaghetti... When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the color of the walls.’ If we take Kippenberger at his word, a significant question arises: *How does painting belong to a network?*”

-David Joselit¹

¹ Joselit, D. (2009). Painting beside Itself. *October*, 130, 125–134. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40368572>

I was idly amusing myself one day last Spring by submitting common idioms (i.e. “you reap what you sow” or “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” etc.) into the AI text-to image generator craiyon². Perhaps feeling threatened by the imminent robot takeover of the arts (as well as everything else), I was pleased by the machine’s failure to grasp the concept behind these metaphors. But when I submitted “alphabet soup³” I was delighted by bowl after bowl of nonsensical (and multi-colored!) shapes and swirls, floating in various flavors of broth. It reminded me a bit of the phenomenon that makes it almost impossible to read or write in dreams⁴—with letters constantly morphing and slipping away. It also reminded me of what attracts me to certain moments of abstraction in painting, particularly by artists who play with text and letter forms, and how the formal language of painting can subvert the literal meaning of text.

In the works here, text functions across a range of legibility. In **Raque Ford’s** drawing “*Friendship Vanity*”, a collage of words overlap and reveal each other through the negative space between letters. Like particles in the big bang, each letterform seems to be expanding outward and away from the word that it originates from. Her piece “*honey flower*” is a long ball chain stringing together various plexiglass letters and shapes; unrelated to each other or to the piece’s title.

In the three untitled works by **Rebecca Watson Horn** I see the letter forms as collapsing the distinction between mark-making and handwriting. The letters remain upright while landing somewhere between cursive and block lettering, and the wide tooth of the burlap surface forces a kind of scumbling effect even in the letters with the most clarity.

Blake O’Brien’s pieces play not only with various languages, but also with the design of different letter forms that he borrows and manipulates from historical sources. His piece “*Herma (Courage!)*” repeats the word “courage” in various languages and typefaces, and encapsulates as its centerpiece: a painted book by the same name. The floating question marks in his teardrop-shaped “*Untitled*” remind me of the image recently captured by the James Webb Space Telescope, showing the actively forming stars Herbig-Haro 46/47 that form the uncanny appearance of a question mark in outer space⁵.

Alyse Ronayne often samples typography from a range of sources; including activist graphic design and cowbrands used by female cattle ranchers. Although “*Untitled (light fuschia)*” doesn’t technically include any text, the pink lines and curves function as deconstructed symbols derived from and inspired by these sources.

² <https://www.craiyon.com/>

³ Alphabet Soup (the canned, tomato based broth with letter-shaped pasta) and “*Alphabet Soup*” (the linguistic term referring to the confusion that ensues when acronyms become too long or are used too frequently) both have uncertain origins, but are generally agreed to have originated contemporaneously in the late 19th/early 20th century in the UK and/or in America. The question of which came first is the classic chicken-and-egg paradox, and I intend the title of this exhibition to evoke both the food and the metaphor. See: *A history of Alphabetti Spaghetti* : (n.d.).

<https://www.theocelot.co.uk/a-history-of-alphabetti-spaghetti/>

⁴ Tayag, Y. (2017, November 16). *Can you read in your dreams? Science reveals why most people can't*. Inverse.

<https://www.inverse.com/science/can-you-read-in-your-dreams>

⁵ Overbye, D. (2023, August 18). *The Biggest Question Mark in Astronomy? You’re Looking at It*. New York Times.

Retrieved November 20, 2023, from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/science/space/question-mark-space-webb-telescope.html>

In another example of works without actual language, **Lauren Anaïs Hussey**'s paintings appear at first to include scribbled text and accidental inkblots. In fact, this layer of marks comes from the artist's drawing practice, where she connects dots and splotches with lines. In a studio visit she described the process as creating constellations—another invocation of the stars.

Speaking of the cosmos, the title of **Sarah Tortora**'s piece is “*NGC 224*”, which is the technical name for the Andromeda Galaxy. The letters A-N-D-R-O-M-E-D-A are made in glazed ceramic and stacked from front to back, teetering on a steel rod that supports them. It speaks to the artist's longstanding interest in mythology and how language names and shapes history.

Rounding out the show are paintings from two bodies of work by **Ken Weathersby**: starting with three from his “Crossouts” series from 2022. These understated works seem at first to show handwriting underneath a layer of scribbles that function as a frantic act of erasure (in fact—the under layer is also scribbles). These are paired with “305”, from Weathersby's “Dream Paintings” series. A brown and white flower pattern is rendered with Weathersby's characteristic sensitivity, only to be interrupted by a cut-out in the shape of an inverted V, reminiscent of “black triangle” UFOs, famously spotted above Phoenix in 1997⁶. Inset in this shape is a handwritten recollection of one of the artist's dreams. Although Weathersby's dream doesn't include any failed attempts to read or write, it seems fitting to include a work that directly references the subconscious.

I opened with a quote from David Joselit's excellent essay “*Painting Beside Itself*” where he poses the question of “*How does painting belong to a network?*” not only because of Kippenberger's apt spaghetti metaphor. I include it also because the question of which networks to which we belong is such a productive way of feeling situated within the world. The act of building networks is not unlike the act of stringing letters together to form a word or drawing lines between stars to create an image. Whether we look to a *tomato-based* or *primordial* soup to find meaning, it's the act of connecting—ideas, artworks, histories—that builds meaning.

-E.E. Ikeler

About the Artists:

Raque Ford (b. 1986, Columbia, Maryland) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. A solo exhibition of her work is currently on view at The Print Center, Philadelphia, through November 11. Recent solo presentations include Good Weather, Chicago (2023); Greene Naftali, New York (2022, 2020); 321 Gallery, Brooklyn (2019); CAPITAL, San Francisco (2017); and Shoot the Lobster, New York (2017). Significant group shows include Albright Knox Gallery, Buffalo (2022); MoMA PS1, New York (2021); Morán Morán, Mexico City (2021); Kai Matsumiya, New York (2019); Roberta Pelan, Toronto (2017); SculptureCenter, Queens (2016); and Division Gallery, Montreal (2016). Ford's work is in the collections of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Rebecca Watson Horn (b. 1981) received a BFA from The Cooper Union, an MFA from Rutgers University, and attended The Mountain School of Arts, Los Angeles. Forthcoming solo show will be presented at Galeria Marta Cervera, Madrid; Horn's solo exhibitions include *Sigils*, Auroras, São Paulo; *letters as such*, Deli Gallery, New York; White Columns, New York; and *Rub It In*, Soloway Brooklyn. She has participated in several group exhibitions including *The Practice of Everyday*

⁶ Wikipedia contributors. (2023, October 26). *Phoenix Lights*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_Lights

Life, Derosia, New York; *Forland*, Catskill, NY; *Pure Joy*, 1969, New York; *Personal Effects*, Rumpelstiltskin, Brooklyn; *spaceless*, Deli Gallery, Brooklyn; *ZEBRA*, LaKAJE, Brooklyn; *Flower Sermon*, Yui Gallery, New York; *Objectified*, Bromfield Gallery, Boston; *X*, Lyles & King, New York; *Canaries*, Cleopatra's, Brooklyn, and at Hotel Pupik, Scheifling, Austria. Horn lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Lauren Anaïs Hussey is a Brooklyn based artist whose work considers the thresholds of intelligibility in abstraction as a formal language. She attended the University of North Florida for her BFA and holds an MFA in Painting from Cranbrook Academy of Art. Her work has been included in shows at Below Grand, Taymour Grahne Projects, Nexx Asia, Subtitled NYC, Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, Johnny Utah Projects, SHAG, Marvin Gardens, Carol Corey Fine Art, Conduit Gallery. Hussey is a Co-director of Underdonk gallery in Brooklyn.

Blake O'Brien (born 1993; Gulfport, MS) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. O'Brien received an MFA from Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, and a BFA from The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS. O'Brien's recent exhibitions include: *Staring into the Sun* (solo), Kent Place School, Summit NJ; *Spooky Show*, Greene House, Brooklyn, NY; *The Patriot*, O'Flaherty's, New York, NY; *Tactile Sublime*, Dōdōmu Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. Recent awards include an Artist Fellowship Grant from the Mississippi Arts Commission, a Chapter Career Award from the National Society of Arts and Letters, and the Mary Jane McIntire Endowed Fellowship at Indiana University. O'Brien's work has been included in *New American Paintings* issue #141 and *Artmaze Magazine* issue #20.

Alyse Ronayne received a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland in 2008 and an MFA from the Milton Avery School of the Arts at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in 2015. Solo exhibitions of Ronayne's work have taken place at: *Smoke The Moon* in Sante Fe, New Mexico, Belle Isle Viewing Room in Detroit, Michigan; Luxembourg Institute for Artistic Research in New York City; the Fuller Gallery at Indiana University School of Art, Architecture and Design in Bloomington, Indiana; 321 Gallery in Brooklyn, New York; and Jeff Bailey Gallery in Hudson, New York; among others. She lives and works in Sante Fe, NM.

Sarah Tortora is a visual artist living and working in New York City. Through sculpture, writing, and digital photography, her work addresses Classical archetypes and museological display, accepting the premise that every equestrian monument is truly a Trojan horse. She received an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and attended residencies at Skowhegan, MacDowell, and Ox-Bow School of Art, among others. Some group and solo exhibitions of her work have been on view at Wellesley College (Massachusetts), *Tiger Strikes Asteroid* in New York and Los Angeles; *Fjord* in Philadelphia, and *Stove Works* in Tennessee. Sarah is represented by Ulterior Gallery in New York City, and recently held a yearlong residency fellowship at ISCP (International Studio and Curatorial Program) in Brooklyn. In 2024, Tortora will be the Windgate Artist in Residence at Purchase College.

Ken Weathersby has exhibited his work nationally and internationally, with notable solo shows at Minus Space (Brooklyn), Pierogi Gallery (New York), One River Gallery (Englewood, NJ), NIAD Art Center Gallery (Richmond, CA), Some Walls (Oakland, CA), and the John Cotton Dana Gallery, Rutgers University (Newark). His work has been included in group exhibitions at the National Academy of Art Museum (New York), Honey Ramka (Brooklyn), ODETTA Gallery (Brooklyn), 57w57Arts (New York), Parallel Art Space (Ridgewood, NY), Mixed Greens (New York), Aljira Art Center (Newark), the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Gallery (Morristown, NJ), Barbara Walters Gallery at Sarah Lawrence College (Bronxville, New York), the Visual Art Center of NJ (Summit, NJ), Seven (Miami), Toomey Tourell (San Francisco), and I.S. Projects (Leiden, Netherlands), among many others.