

## In Celebration of Toadhouse's Years on This Earth

What does not change/is the will to change  
Charles Olson

John Yau

1.

In lieu of a preface, I would simply like to state that this long overdue exhibition, "Any Position Limits the View (We Are Only Here For A Spell)" at David Richard Gallery, celebrates the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Allan Graham (a.k.a. Toadhouse). It is a celebration the artist deserves, for the generosity of his work and his spirit. I write this not only as an art critic, but also as a friend, admirer, poet and collaborator.

In 2007, while reviewing an exhibition of Toadhouse's drawings at Feature Inc., New York (January 13 – February 17, 2007), I characterized him as:

[A] conceptual artist who has never developed a style or signature mode of presentation, which makes what he does nearly as rare as a unicorn.

I wrote this seven years after our first brief meeting in Santa Fe, while he was installing *As REAL as thinking*, the large survey exhibition organized by Kathleen Shields for the cavernous, multi-roomed gallery at SITE Santa Fe, a space he easily filled with radically different works. The exhibition title came from a line by our mutual friend, the poet Robert Creeley, who suggested that we meet. It was Stuart Arends, another mutual friend and artist, who brought us together.

When I met Toadhouse, I already knew that he was a friend of a number of poets, but I did not yet know how important words have been to his practice, nor had I experienced many of the various ways he uses words in his work – from incorporating Buddhist death poems in an installation, to covering sculptures with book pages, to attaching his own bumper stickers to rechromed car bumpers, to deconstructing words into graphite and oil pseudo-ideograms where the figure-ground relationship contributes to the work's meaning.

I also had no idea that we would eventually collaborate on a series of works that used postcards, an idea he came up with, or that my family and I would stay with him and his wife, Gloria Graham, who is also an artist, in their hay bale house in Las Vegas, New Mexico, overlooking a vast stretch of uninhabited land. All of this and more crossed my mind as I sat down to write this, wondering what form it might take – an essay or a memoir being among the choices. It was then that I realized that, in order to be true to Toadhouse's diverse work and to his generous spirit, I had to write something that did not fit neatly into accepted categories.

2.

Toadhouse is the pseudonym that Allan Graham uses for whatever he makes that incorporates words. The name, Toadhouse, was originally what the artist called a subterranean, kiva-like meditation room that he and his son Jesse had hand dug on their property. It seems that every morning it was filled with toads. Later, Graham read a Zen poem in which “toad” was a metaphor for “mind,” suggesting that Toadhouse meant *Mind House*.

There are many reasons why Graham might have chosen Toadhouse as a pseudonym or, as I would like to think, alter ego. One reason might be that Graham, who knows lots of poets, decided it would be presumptuous to use his name in works involving words, that to do so would be to claim that he too was a poet, which I know from conversation he is not ever likely to do. To take the name Toadhouse would convey that he wasn't taking himself too seriously, but, on another level, he was. As seriously as, say, Samuel Clemens using the nom de plume, “Mark Twain.”

Whatever the reason, Graham began using the self-effacing pseudonym Toadhouse in 1990 for a series of books of haiku and koan-like statements, some of which found their way onto stickers emblazoned on automobile bumpers that the artist rechromed and mounted low on the wall. One of the bumper stickers said: “For a sparrow, life takes flight” – a phrase that simultaneously make sense and nonsense. Graham seems to want to create that short circuit in our thinking, to help us rethink our assumptions, the many givens we accept without question.

Imagine my puzzlement and delight as I went from a darkened room where a circle of Buddhist death poems, mounted on low stands, required that the viewer bend over or kneel in order to read them, to standing in a well-lit room with shiny car bumpers jutting out from the wall at about the height they would be if still attached to a car. I immediately grasped that Graham made his work according to an inner logic and that he cared little about art world trends.

3.  
In the late 1990s, shortly after moving into the house in the mountains east of Santa Fe, where he and Gloria currently reside, Graham began working with words in his drawings. This is how he described what he was up to in an interview we did in 2007 (*Brooklyn Rail*, December 2007 – January 2008):

I took red rosin paper we'd been using in the construction of the house, and, because we had an outhouse out here, I started writing “dung” over and over, and made a combination of Chinese landscapes, soft mountains, and a sitting figure. I just went from there to where a word cluster looked slightly like a UFO, and I thought, “I can't do this, not living in New Mexico.” (*laughs*) “This is sure death.” That lasted about three or four minutes and then I thought, “Oh well, whatever you do, you do it. Nobody has to see it.” So I started doing drawings that had a cluster of one word that looked like a UFO moving through a field of other words. That's the first real breakthrough to where I started working with words and my own

words in that sense, and they were small, and they were very time-consuming.

In these drawings, words such as “dung,” “lake” and “bird” become the things they name. Typically, Graham would write “lake” over and over in tiny, precise script until it formed a shape the viewer would read-see as a lake. “Birds” and “UFOs” flew through the sky. Words became things. In depicting a dung pile by literally piling up the word “dung,” Graham embraced his body’s existence in time. At the same time, by layering the words, Graham defines seeing as act of untangling. He transforms classical Chinese landscape painting, which arises out of calligraphy, into something that is utterly his own, which is no small accomplishment. It is this kind of engagement with language as an object that distinguishes his work from other artists using words: Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and Kay Rosen.

4.

From the first of these drawings, where words became shapes, to the more recent works, in which he deconstructs words while compelling viewers to sound them out phonetically, the territory Graham explores is situated between word and image. Using graphite and oil on large canvases, he takes apart a word or a phrase, an action calibrated to slow down our reading. The familiar becomes strange, but more importantly, it stands revealed (as Charles Olson would say). At the same time – and this seems in keeping with Graham’s whole career – the works are somehow both a drawing and a painting, a hybrid.

In the recent *Icon* (2013), Graham draws two bars, each one extending in from the left and right sides of the canvas to form the white letter “I” out of the negative space. The “I,” made up of these two horizontals spanning the canvas and a vertical that joins them, occupies the upper two thirds of the composition. In the bottom third, Graham has created cutouts on a black ground that form three similarly curved letters: C-O-N. The white “I” sits like a column on the base provided by the black ground.

The viewer can read the letters in at least two ways: I con and, as it is sounded out, “Eye con.” Graham has used the word “icon” to take itself apart, to expose an icon as something that is not objective, that is a product of culture and an agreed upon belief. Moreover, the drawing suggests that icons are repeatedly subject to various forms of manipulation (or con job), as anyone who has seen how the American flag (as a symbol) has been used and misused will tell you.

In *MANMAID* (2007), Graham pairs “man” and “maid,” which the viewers sound out as “manmade.” The pairing conveys the inequality of the sexes as well as suggests who is responsible for the imbalance. The succinctness of *MANMAID* is unrivalled and – despite its pointed meaning – I would claim non-didactic. The artist doesn’t lecture the viewer. Rather, he uses a homophone to stir us out of our habits of thinking.

In *EXIT* (2013), Graham sets the letters EX above the letters IT. While the letters E, I and T, all in white, are similar in their blockiness, the X is made of two thin, crisscrossing white lines. The difference in the letters causes the X to stand out, as if it were separate from the others, suggesting the phrase, X marks the spot. This raises the question, What spot does the X mark? There is of course another way to read-see EXIT, which is EX-IT, the it (or thing) is no longer what it once was, which reinforces the meaning of the word, EXIT. It has left, as we all must one day.

In *EXIT*, as in the other drawings, Graham shapes how he lives in time. He does this knowing that his exit is inevitable and that if all he can do is make his X, so be it. His works convey this awareness with immense grace and humor. Such acumen is rare and, I would add, necessary.