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Toadhouse

by John Yau

Drawings

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My first introduction to Toadhouse was in 2000 at *As REAL as thinking*, the large survey exhibition at SITE Santa Fe of conceptual artist Allan Graham, which was organized by Kathleen Shields. The exhibition title came from a poem by Robert Creeley, who suggested that I look the artist up when I was in Santa Fe. Originally, Toadhouse was the subterranean, kiva-like meditation room that the artist and his son Jesse had hand dug on their property near Santa Fe, which got its name because every morning it filled with toads. Later, the artist read a Zen poem in which “toad” was a metaphor for “mind,” suggesting that Toadhouse meant *Mind House*.



TOADHOUSE, “Shit Is a Sure Sign of Life,” 2006.
Graphite on paper; 34”x 30.25”. Courtesy of Feature.

In 1990, Graham adopted Toadhouse as a pseudonym for a series of books of haiku and koan-like statements, some of which were printed on stickers and attached to automobile bumpers that he rechromed and mounted low on the wall. The Toadhouse works comprised a self-contained body of work within Graham’s oeuvre, which is typical of his uncategorizable practice. Toadhouse is that part of Graham that makes works involving words, most often in the form of a statement on the mind/body split and those moments of *satori* when such rifts are momentarily overcome. As

Toadhouse, he draws words and phrases arranged into abstract pictorial fields, acronyms, and pseudo-ideograms. Without privileging one over the other, Toadhouse can range from the calligraphic to the imagistic to the graphic. Language is a fluid entity capable of accommodating wildly varying visual manifestations.

In his survey show, Graham, who possesses of an uncommon generosity of spirit, included a group of paintings by his friend Oli Sihvonen (1921-1991) near paintings that Graham derived from Sihvonen's echocardiograms. The exhibition also featured wall works that were simultaneously paintings and sculptures, some of which were covered with pages from books, as well as an installation based on Buddhist death poems. Everywhere I looked I saw something unfamiliar and engaging. It was a dizzying and humbling experience —I felt I was just beginning to catch up, while being reminded once again how provincial the New York art scene can be. Sometimes you have to leave the city to see what's going on in the world.

The catalog accompanying the exhibition listed a biography and selected exhibitions for Sihvonen but not for Graham. I think this act of self-effacement is in keeping with Graham, 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. In that regard he is much closer to Sigmar Polke than to Joseph Kosuth or Lawrence Weiner.

In many ways it is not surprising that Toadhouse, a largely unknown figure in the New York art world, is the author of this small exhibition of graphite drawings. An impish spirit runs through each drawing, its text, and a precise but tender sense of the absurd. One drawing reads in its entirety: "Shit is a sure sign of life." The letters' differing sizes, spacing, and tonality slows the reading down, so that the pleasure one gets is both visual and aural; we see, read, and hear, usually in that order. The arrangement of the letters also encourages us to read the line as, "Sh, it is a sure sign of life." This is language taken apart, and it is we who have to put it back together. In another drawing, "This mind is taking this body for a walk," the elongated letters read like a weird barcode. It's as if the letters are about to enter hyperspace, which could be another way to understand the human imagination. The graphite's varying shades of warm blacks and grays are deeply sensual, engaging the viewer on the level of text, image, and physicality. By capturing all the senses, not just sight, Graham proves that conceptual art need not be puritanical; at the same time, his ability to parse, shape and delay the passage of meaning from the visual to the literal

heightens our awareness, like the underground kiva filling with toads, of the continual, mysteriously shifting order of mind and body.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR