
Review for Cork Printmakers touring Alphabet Series posted on the Visual Artists Ireland website November 2013



Sylvia Taylor, *E For Evening Echo*, 2013

'Alphabet'

21 September – 09 November 2013

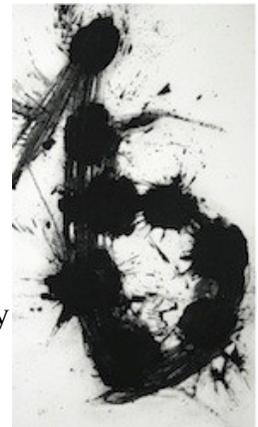
West Cork Arts Centre

As a research exercise, I asked a child, an adult and an artist to recite the alphabet, allotting each letter a word that begins with that letter. I implored them not to think about it too much, to simply say the first thing that popped into their heads. As expected, the child came up with A is for apple, D is for dog, H is for house and so forth. The adult's words were mostly the same but with a general slant toward more weighty concerns; the cat was replaced by a car, the orange by an oven and the monkey by money. The artist allotted his letters the most unpredictable words, but cheated by thinking too much. He

came up with J is for juggernaut, P is for porcupine and, after a brain-racking pause, he conceded X would have to be xylophone.

For the exhibition 'Alphabet', 26 artists from Cork Printmakers were issued with a letter and invited to make an artwork in response to it. They were encouraged to "investigate what a specifically Irish alphabet should look like" and "to take on cultural and economic challenges that are relevant to contemporary Ireland".

I was surprised to find only one print based on the Early Medieval Ogham alphabet. It came at the very beginning: Zoe Dalton's *A for Alpha*. It's less surprising that several of the artists' instinctive reactions to the mention of 'contemporary Ireland' was one of discontent, despair, even fury. In the exhibition literature, Valerie Gleeson described her *B for Burst* as a "true reflection of the current state of the Irish economy". Her letter broke through its clear lines and exploded into a splattered mess. Claire Nagle chose the title *Nama* for her etching to represent N, and Shane O'Driscoll's *Z for To the Future* depicted a tiger's regal face with two lines of text printed in Irish below. The slogan translates as 'I'm only sleeping, strength will come into me again'.



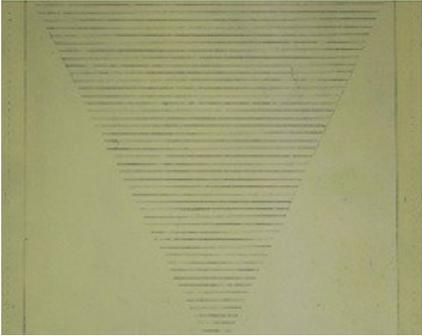
Valerie Gleeson, *B is for Burst*, 2013

Other pieces were less forthright but equally disgruntled. Marianne Keating's *W for Class War* was a doctored image of the Dublin Metropolitan Police charging a rally that took place in the aftermath of the 1913 lockout. Sean Hanrahan's *I for Keep your homes, pay no debt* makes reference to the days of Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Land League. Both pieces were rooted in the past yet relevant to the current climate of social unrest.

Aspects of the local were present in Paul Le Roque's *F for Forde*, which paid tribute to Henry Ford's link with BallinacCarthy and the tractor factory in Cork city in the 1920s. Sylvia Taylor's *E for Evening Echo* was a gorgeously detailed relief on Japanese paper. In front of a wall covered with insects, a badger peruses an animal-oriented edition of the Cork newspaper. Illustrative in style, it bore

resemblance to a picture in a children's book, which was especially apt in the context of the exhibition.

For me, the most interesting artworks were those that took the alphabet's indelible association with childhood into consideration. This was done darkly in the case of Aisling Dolan's *S for Precious Child* and Heike Heilig's *P for Pca*, both of which made subtle reference to child abuse. A *pca* is 'a creature of Celtic folklore that can assume a variety of forms' and there was something immensely unsettling about this definition coupled with Heilig's image of a ghostly figure lingering in a gloomy room. Peter McMorris took a lighter approach in *Each to their own H*, which cleverly explored classroom politics by underlining the difference between the spelling of the letter H as taught by Protestant and Catholic schools, 'aitch' and 'haitch', respectively.



Eileen Kennedy, V, 2010, hard ground etching and aquatint restitution.

Several artworks incorporated some element of fauna or flora, and it was heartening to find that the suggestion of contemporary Ireland still gives rise to associations with the splendour of the natural world. Aoife Layton's masterfully executed mezzotint *U for Ulchabhin* depicted a native barn owl with uplifted wings framed by a U-shaped window, while Tom Doig's *D for Drizzle* comprised an assembly of well-watered flowers bloom beneath gathering rain clouds. Shirley Fitzpatrick's *K is for Knowing* celebrated our strong mythological connection with nature as well as emphasising the "urgent need for trees to be planted in Ireland" and Georgina Sutton's etching for *X* gracefully shunned the xylophone. *Axil (latin axilla)* depicted an unfolding bud in a simple yet striking symbol of

Only two artists chose to focus solely on the form of their letter. May Holland's M shed its amenable curves in favour of bold red and black blocks. Eileen Kennedy's V was pared back to an inverted heap of parallel lines. Both were eye-catching and gratifyingly uncomplicated, yet overall the exhibition was more interesting for its subtext than for its forms. Each artist eschewed the first thing to pop into their heads and rummaged about a bit, exactly as artists should. The finished prints came together into an alphabet that represents contemporary Ireland in its timely spirit of restiveness.

Sara Baume is a writer based in East Cork