KAY
ROSEN

H Is for
House

H Is for House

It is often assumed that letterforms and printed words are neutral, graphic symbols that are merely vehicles for meaning. Like the relationship between fish and the ocean, we generally are oblivious to any content that might be present in the alphabet, skimming over words and sentences without giving a second thought to the meaning that might be lurking within. For artist Kay Rosen, this invisibility of content in letterforms and texts is the primary subject matter of a career that has now covered four decades. Rosen's practice, however, has evolved over the years, and the recent work that is the subject of this exhibition goes deeper into the nature of text and its relationship with the world. *H Is for House*, the title of both the exhibition and a large, two-part wall painting, also points to Rosen's chosen raw material, the alphabet, and the architectural nature of the works included.

In 1529, the French humanist, engraver, and editor Geofroy Tory published his book *Champ Fleury*, which was part of the movement in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that revived the Roman capital letter and led the way to the form of the alphabet as we know it today. But Tory, who was a transitional figure between medieval thought and Renaissance innovation, didn't think of letters as purely abstract forms. His reconstruction of the Roman alphabet was based on the proportions of the human figure as much as pure geometry. Tory's work on the alphabet was an attempt to reconcile the deep content inherent in the Roman alphabet (and Classical antiquity in general) with purely formal concerns, such as visual harmony. In the words of media designer and researcher Gabriel Smedresman, "Tory's uniqueness lies in his search for meaning behind the very shapes of the letters themselves."[1]

Just as Geofroy Tory did in the sixteenth century, Rosen believes that the alphabet is text to be analyzed, with meaning to be coaxed out and amplified through manipulation. Her background is as a linguist, and the insight gleaned by Rosen from this field regarding the

units, nature, structure, and modifications of language have certainly informed her work; but it is the visual nature of written language—a blind spot in traditional linguistics—that captivated her attention and paved the way into her practice as an artist. Letterforms and words are complex constructions that contain not only the history of their formation, but also the beliefs and biases of the cultures that make them. Rosen's formative years coincided with feminism's second wave, and many of the works she produced during the 1980s, such as *Various Strata* (1985–96), reflected the ways gender was encoded within language. During the period from the 1980s to the early 1990s, many artists began using text for political purposes, and Rosen's work was seen as part of this movement, although it was set apart from the beginning by a concern with *seeing* words as well as reading them. Humor—of a sort—has also played an ongoing role in her work through the literary technique of word play, although not so much through invention as by simply revealing what is hidden in plain sight. Rosen's humor grows out of the not-so-obvious truths that are found embedded *inside* words.

For those familiar with Rosen's work, this exhibition sets itself apart by one immediately noticeable fact: all the works, other than the self-descriptive *BrowNose*, are in black and white. In the past, Rosen's work has reveled in bright, pure colors (usually two, at the most three) and the works in this exhibition present a more sober face because of their limited palette. But, as we all know, color

EVEN
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is seductive, and the stripped-down character of the works in *H Is for House* has the effect of making the viewer more aware of the structure of each piece. The majority of Rosen's color works are read as rectangles, and as such relate to the format of traditional painting, but these black and white works—relating to, but at the same time functioning independently of, their support—become more sculptural and architectonic. Additionally, all of the works on paper are of a vertical format, which is also unusual for the artist. Rosen's horizontal, colored works relate to signage (the artist has frequently made billboards), but these works do not read as signs, but as physical constructions: letters and words used as building blocks, stacked and aligned, with both form and content frequently relating to gravity. For instance, the relentless symmetry of the work *Even Steven* has a weight and balance that relates more to the construction of a brick wall than to a painting or a sign. These vertical compositions have another, deeper, level of content, however; two-dimensional works with a vertical format are traditionally referred to as portrait, as they relate to the figure, and Rosen's vertical works exhibit strong figurative connotations, revealing a surprising interest of the artist: dance.

Rosen has frequently mentioned the influence of the choreographer Trisha Brown, a dancer whose work merges vernacular movement with inventive and rigorous formal concerns. Like many of Brown's works, those in this exhibition play with gravity and the dynamics of stability, but also, on a deeper level, with the idea of isolating and emphasizing the structures of found materials. In the case of Brown, this comes from creating dance by formalizing common gesture, athletic performance, and improvisation; while with Rosen it is by creating, in the artist's words, "works that are practically self-made since they are created out of their own body parts, with only a little push from me."[2] Parallels between Brown's and Rosen's work can be found in a piece such as *Ledge*, which is included in this exhibition. In the work the word edge, which is embedded in the word ledge, has become detached, reflecting on the perilous situation where the negotiation of a ledge demands balance and there is the potential of falling. The vertical orientation of the words breaks with conventional presentation, and emphasizes the gravity of the situation (no pun intended!). Brown's dance *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (first performed in 1970), in which a dancer, tethered from above with ropes, walks down the side of a building while keeping the body perfectly horizontal, similarly takes something common (the simple act of walking) and transforms it by rotating the body of the performer ninety degrees, transforming the familiar into the extreme. Rosen's interest in dance is evidenced by her recent collaboration with choreographer Liz Gerring in the dance *(T)here to (T)here*,[3] which featured the artist's animated, projected text, providing a meta-level of meaning for the movement of the performers.

The relationship between Rosen's work and the dance world brings us directly back to Geofroy Tory's work with the alphabet, and particularly his belief that the proportion of letters should be based on the human figure. Tory was influenced, as were others in the Renaissance, by the work of Vitruvius, the Roman author, architect, and engineer who created the famous drawing, now referred to as the "Vitruvian Man," that connected

Ledge, 2015
Courtesy of the artist
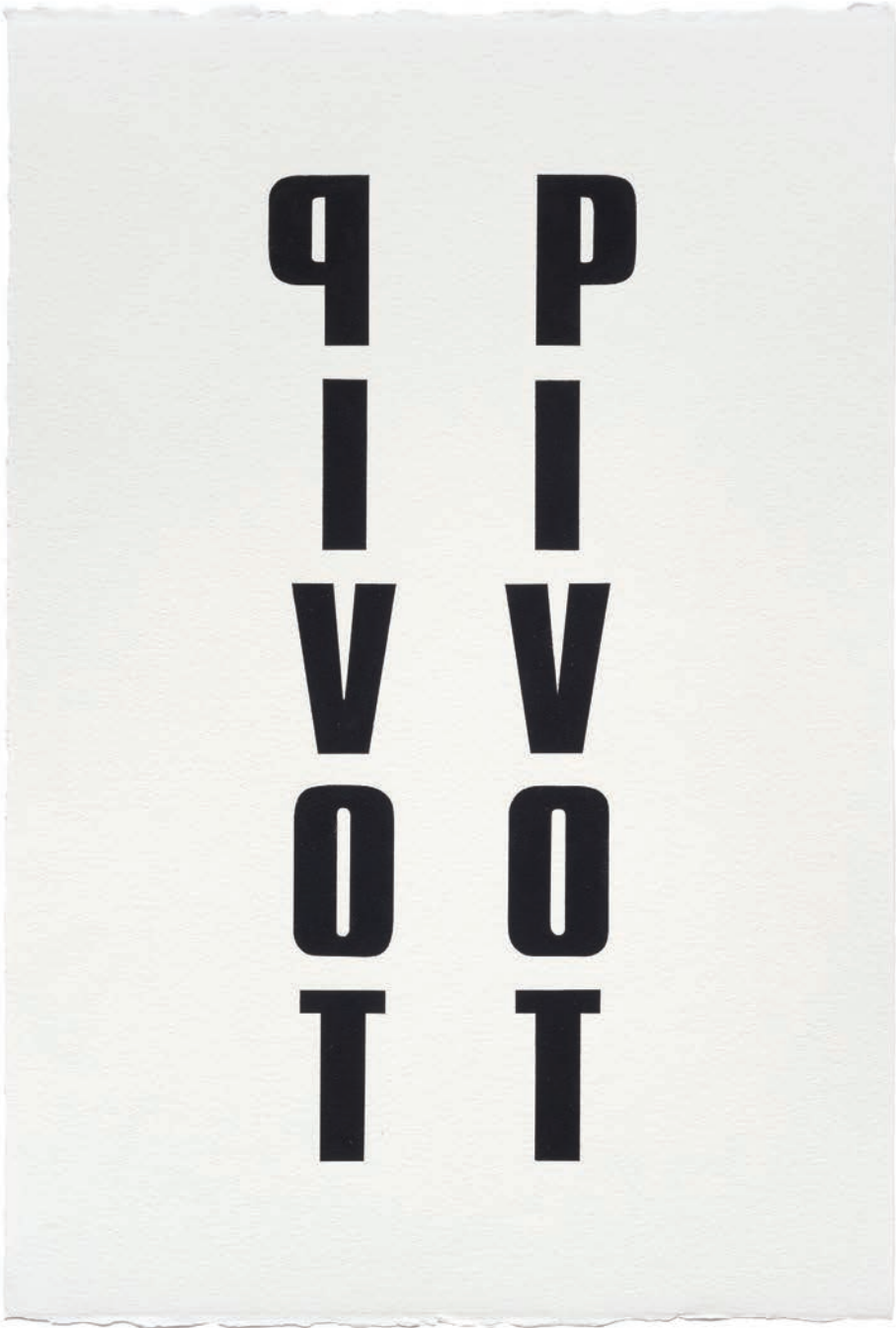
Pivot, 2015
Courtesy of the artist

the proportions of the human figure to the circle and square. Tory's obsession with perfecting letterforms was partially based on the proportions of the body, particularly its essential symmetry, but Tory also connected the forms of letters with architecture. As Tory wrote in *Champ Fleury*:

> Letters should have a savour of architecture. And it is true; for A represents the gable end of a house, inasmuch as it is shaped like a gable. The aspirate H represents the body of the house, for the part below the cross-stroke, which I have called the central horizontal line, is placed there to form lower halls and chambers; and the part above the said line is to form in like manner upper halls, or large and middle-sized rooms…[4]

Tory's belief about "letters having the savour of architecture," written almost five hundred years ago, has a startling resonance with Rosen's two-part wall painting *H Is for House*, in which a capital letter H is presented both upright and lying on its side, each version commenting on the way the form of a capital H has the stability of a building, as well as dividing space evenly into two chambers. Rosen's ninety-degree rotation of the letter transforms walls into ceilings and floors, and a ceiling/floor into a dividing wall, creating two houses that are at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. It is not coincidental that Rosen made this work specifically as a wall painting, to be installed in relationship with the architecture of The Aldrich, as its placement on opposing walls amplifies the work's intrinsic dialectic, as well as speaking directly about the architecture of the Museum itself: a two-story building in a primarily residential neighborhood. In this work, Rosen has taken the innocence of a child's alphabet book and turned it into a meditation on form, space, structure, and the meaning that can be generated by the interrogation of text.

The majority of the works on paper in this exhibition are composed out of five lines stacked vertically, a form that echoes the major elements of the human
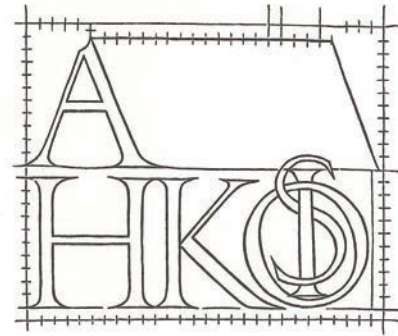

figure: head, upper abdomen, lower abdomen, upper legs, lower legs. In the work *Pivot*, two stacked versions of the five-letter word stand next to one another, resembling two figures looking in opposite directions. The symmetry of the letters I, V, O, and T are the stable "body" of each figure, while the P, which has been flipped in reverse on the left figure, inexorably references the head. In the world of dance a pivot is a general term for a turn in which the performer's body rotates around its vertical axis without traveling. Rosen's *Pivot*, through the simple mirroring of vertical typography, has literally embodied both the meaning of the word and the movement it describes. Although not necessary for the reading of the work, the derivation of the word pivot goes back to the Middle Ages, with its first meaning being "hinge" or "hinge pin," an object that contains the mirroring of form as well as being emblematic of rotation. Rosen, having given up formal linguistics years ago, has transformed the linguist's love of both morphology and etymology from social science into a peculiar form of concrete poetry that has the ability to speak on multiple levels with a reductive economy of means.

Although coming of age after the heyday of Minimalism, the reductive aspect of Rosen's work exists in its shadow. Additionally, her exclusive use of text has obscured to a certain degree the relationship of the work with the Modernist genre of geometric abstraction, a tradition that connects Rosen with a roster of artists as diverse as Mondrian, Ellsworth Kelly, and John McLaughlin. Perhaps the greatest correspondence between Modernism and

(above)
Geofroy Tory, Untitled drawing from *Champ Fleury*, illustrating the correspondence between letterforms and architecture, 1529

Rosen's text-based work can be found in the world of graphic design, and particularly the influence of the Bauhaus on type and typography. The bold use of letterforms and color by Bauhaus-influenced designers has informed much of visual culture over the course of the past ninety years, and although Rosen is decisively not a graphic designer, her work exhibits a similar awareness of letterforms and the space they occupy on the page. A local example of relevant type design that visitors to The Aldrich might find familiar is the Swiss-born designer Herbert Matter's iconic logo for the New Haven Railroad, which was created in 1954. Formed by the simple stacking of capital letters and utilizing three colors—white, black, and red—Matter's logo uses type as architecture, creating an image that has the weight of a locomotive or a railroad bridge. Related formally to Rosen's work, Matter's New Haven Railroad logo uses type to embody its subject, but doesn't use language as its subject matter. It does, however, revel in the relationship between letterforms by amplifying their visual nature and by creating signification through manipulation.

In an increasingly digital age, words and sentences are moving in the direction of shorthand through the use of brevity and abbreviation. Some linguists have predicted the demise of traditional punctuation and spelling before the middle of the century because of the quickly evolving nature of text messaging. It is of no small consequence that for much of our personal communication we are giving up voice for text, and much texting is taking on graphic, visual attributes through the use of acronyms and emoticons. In this brave new world, Rosen's work gains an added significance because of its emphasis on visuality and content in equal measure. The artist's works are part of the continuum that includes the early Renaissance animism of Geofroy Tory, the Modernist sensibility of the Bauhaus, the formal structure found in Post-Modern choreographers such as Trisha Brown, and the abridged, often humorous nature of text messaging. As with the truism that sometimes one plus one doesn't equal two, a work like Rosen's *Two Times Four* proves that language, when looked at in a certain light, can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Richard Klein

Kay Rosen was born in 1943 in Corpus Christi, Texas; she lives and works in Gary, Indiana.

1. Gabriel Smedresman, "Alphabetic Architects: Geofroy Tory and the Renaissance Reconstruction of the Roman Capital Alphabet" (BA thesis, Yale University School of Architecture, 2006, p. 32). http://www.smedresmania.com/archives/Paper.pdf
2. Kay Rosen, "A Constructed Conversation: between Kay Rosen and Virginia Woolf," Journal #3, Vol. 1/No.1, London, 2010, ed. Josh McNamara, Neal MacInnes, Hanna Tanimura, p. 48.
3. Liz Gerring Dance Company, (T)here to (T)here, Liz Gerring, choreographer, in collaboration with Kay Rosen; Michael J. Schumacher, composer; Amith Chandrashaker, production and lighting design; Joshua Higgason, video set design; Quinn Czejkowski, costume design (in collaboration with Liz Gerring and Miguel Anaya), Baryshnikov Arts Center, New York, November 10–12, 2016. Presented as part of Lincoln Center's White Light Festival.
4. Geofroy Tory, *Champ Fleury*, translated into English and annotated by George B. Ives (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967, first published by the Grolier Club, New York, 1927), p. 49.

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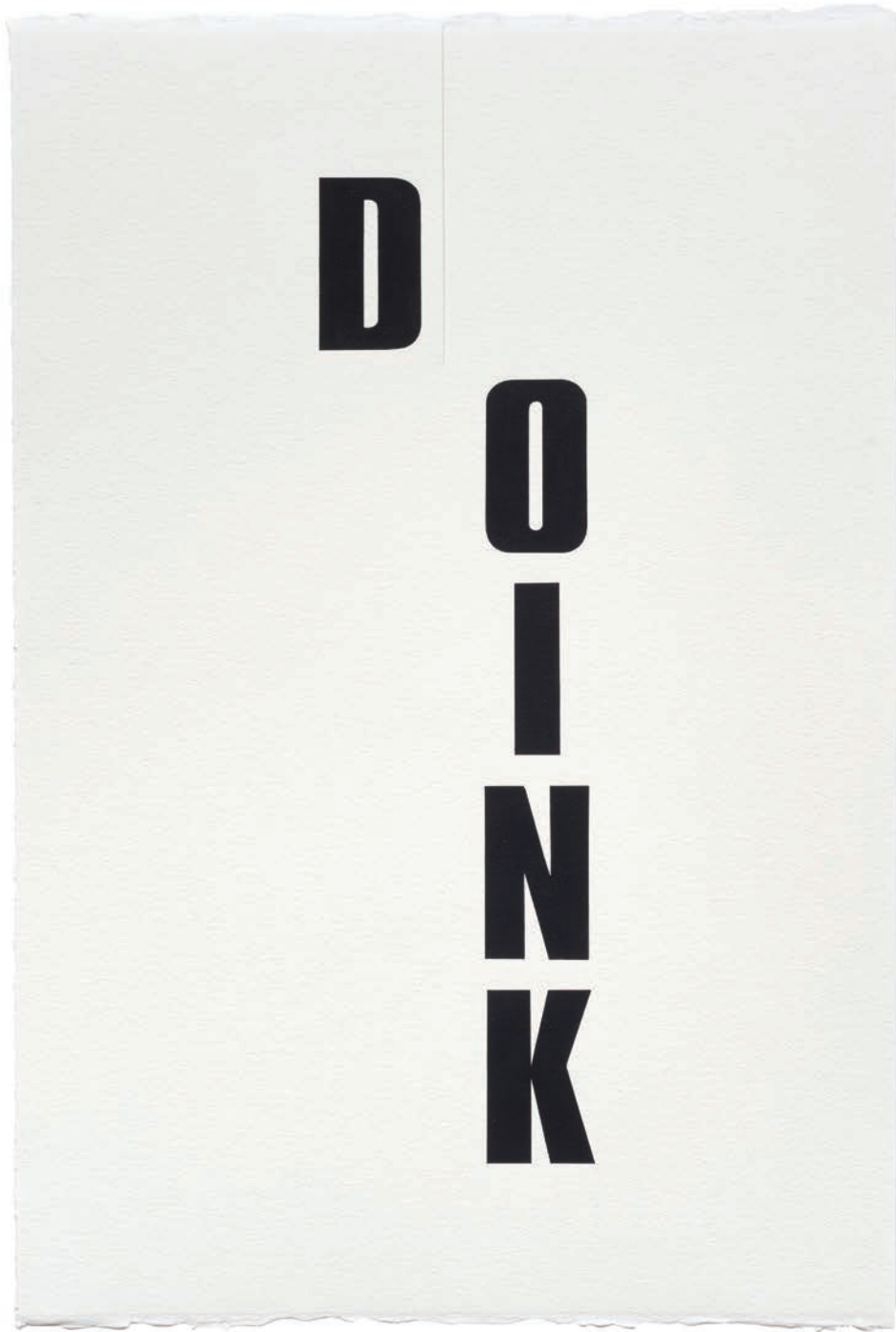
(opposite, left to right)
Herbert Matter, New Haven Railroad Logo, 1954

Two Times Four, 2015–16
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Did 'Ya Hear About the Pig Who Walked Into a Door?, 2015
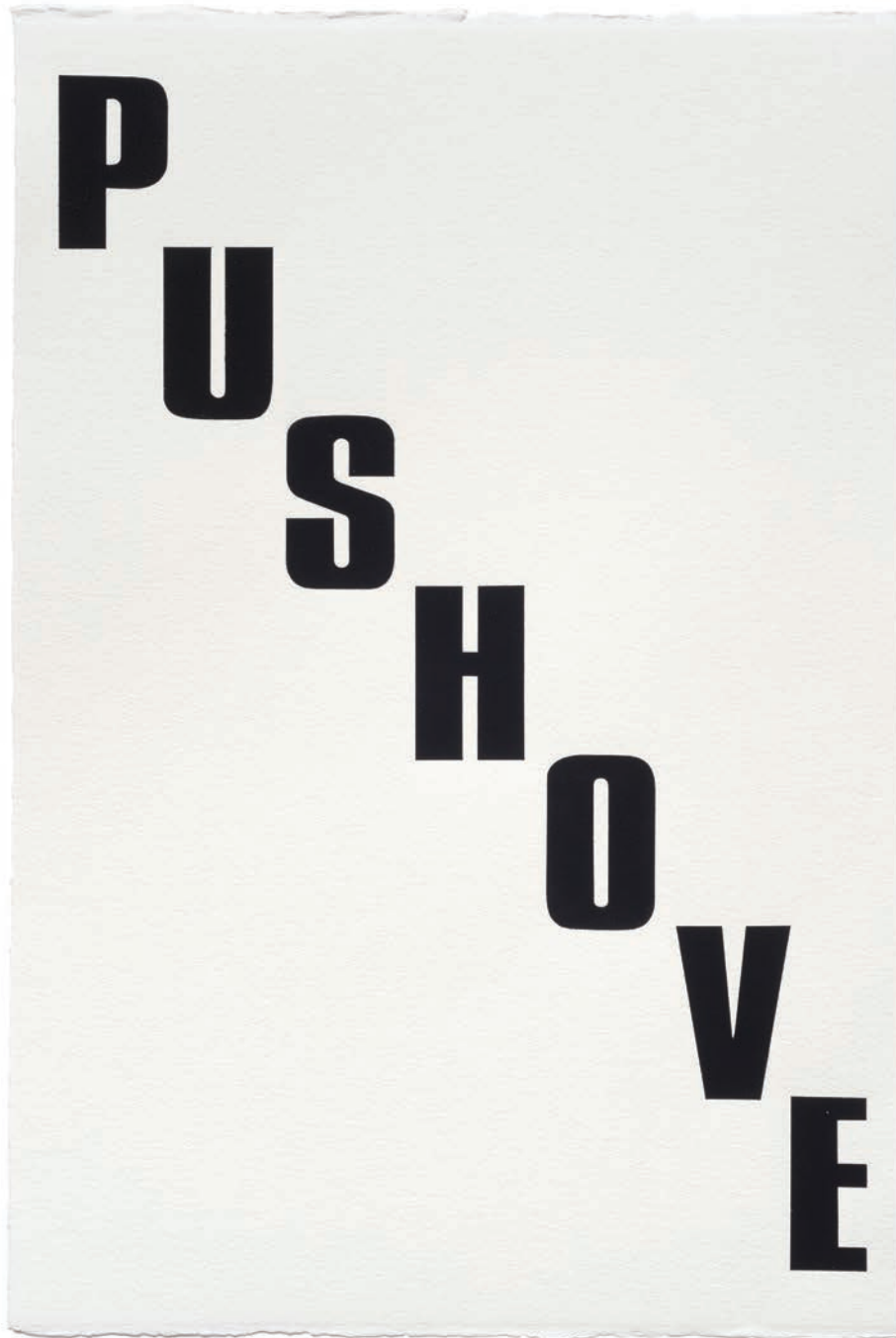Courtesy of the artist
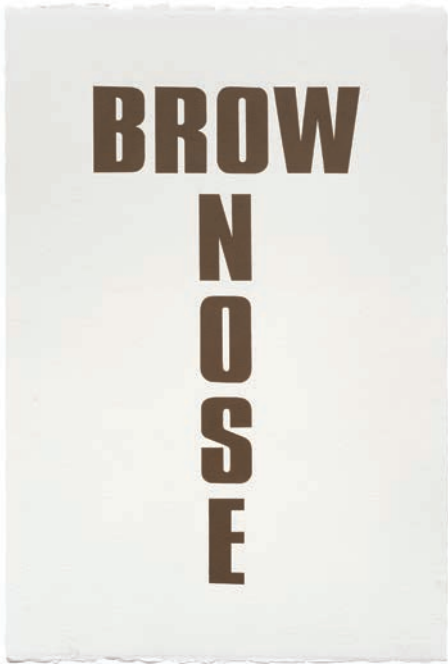
(clockwise from top left)
Dangle, 2015
Something Happened, 2015
Rear Area, 2015
BrowNose, 2015

Courtesy of the artist

Barking Up the Wrong Tree, 2015
Courtesy of the artist

Push Comes to Shove, 2015
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Head Over Heels, 2016
Courtesy of the artist

Trickle Down, 2015
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches
unless otherwise noted

Barking Up the Wrong Tree, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

BrowNose, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Dangle, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

*Did 'Ya Hear About the Pig Who
Walked Into a Door?*, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Even Steven, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Ledge, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Long, Long Time, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15
Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Meg, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15
Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Pivot, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Push Comes to Shove, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15
Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Rear Area, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Something Happened, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15

Trickle Down, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15
Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Two Times Four, 2015
Acrylic gouache on paper
22 ½ x 15
Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Head Over Heels, 2016
Latex paint on wall
16 x 16 feet

H Is for House, 2017
Latex paint on two opposing walls
West wall: 14 x 22 feet
East wall: 16 x 18 feet

All works courtesy of the artist
unless otherwise noted

(above, left to right)
Meg, 2015
Long, Long Time, 2015

Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York