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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

KAY ROSEN
FREE FOOD: (for thought)
September 9 - November 11, 2023

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce *FREE FOOD (for thought)*, an exhibition of drawings and wall paintings by Kay Rosen—the artist’s fourth presentation at the gallery.

“When it comes to reading my work,” Kay Rosen once said, “Throw out all the rules you ever learned: spelling, spacing, capitalization, margins, linear reading, composition...all your old reading habits will be useless.” Rosen’s artworks—drawings and paintings of single words or short phrases—call attention to the unexpected dramas she finds hiding inside letterforms or words, where most of us assume no meaning is to be found. Rosen reveals her discoveries by arranging, scaling, or applying color to series of letters in atypical ways, encouraging a non-linear, associative form of reading akin to solving a puzzle (usually unlocked, at least in part, by a clue in an artwork’s title). Her work always originates from a place of play—she pokes and prods language until what looks like a sign turns into a story (and sometimes a silly one). Occasionally her almost-readymades immediately point to larger elements of culture or history or politics (as in 2012, halfway through the War in Afghanistan, when she found the city *KANDAHAR* inside

the expression *BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE*). In many cases, her artworks (even those that initially seem to revel purely in the delight of language, sidestepping any socio-political associations when Rosen first conceives of them) gain additional meaning over time, as years and decades pass, news develops, and history is made. This exhibition of new and older work investigates how Rosen's light touch and the inherent mutability of language have led to an oeuvre, nearly five decades in the making, with a miraculous ability to shapeshift over time and continually reinvent itself as engaged with the perennial *now*.

A casual glance at Rosen's work could give the mistaken impression she is a printmaker. She reproduces vector fonts precisely enough to look like little more than a command-P was involved in their production. In reality, everything in this show was made *entirely by hand*. She uses a computer to lay out her compositions, but employs carbon paper to transfer, freehand, a loose guide to her drawing surface. She applies final outlines of letters with a variety of French curve stencils and tape in order to achieve a remarkably steady, crisp line. If you look closely at a drawing (even though she would modestly implore you not to), you can sometimes find a tiny moment of imperfection that makes clear its decidedly non-mechanical origin. Professional sign painters execute her oversized wall paintings; the many tricks of that trade also reach toward the seductive precision Rosen prefers. If you can divorce her drawings and paintings from their content and look at Rosen's handmade letters purely as *shapes*, you may find a new appreciation for the transcendent and largely invisible beauty of typography.

Rosen shaped all of the colored-pencil drawings in this show with Garamond, a delicate, seriffed typeface, with origins in 16th-century France, that writer R.E. Hawley described as the "fine china of typography." Rosen likes the font, she likes it in italics and roman, she likes each of her new constructions in two colors—and those were enough parameters to establish a pattern that would allow her to begin "breaking words down to mean something else" and build a new body of work.

Fig in a Frig was the first of the group to present itself to Rosen. The drawing reads *frig*, in lowercase Garamond Italic. The R is the color of blackberry; the other three letters are an even-darker grayish eggplant. She was remembering the fig tree in the backyard of her

childhood home—how much she loved climbing it with her sister and the neighborhood kids in the Texas summertime. A refrigerator, of course, is a preservation tool, but in the case of this artwork, one that holds a memory rather than food. And although today its colloquialism is usually spelled *fridge*, when the word first made the jump from spoken to written English, perhaps in the late 1930s, it was often spelled *frig* (but still pronounced FRIJ). Eventually it gained a D and an E to arrive at its current form, likely to make its pronunciation more clear and avoid confusion with the other, more vulgar connotation of *frig*. Rosen rather likes this naughty chameleonism, though—the more a single word in her artworks can do, the better.

The upper line of the drawing *At Last* reads *atlas*, in dark blue, and is precariously balanced on top of a lighter-blue lowercase *t*. The drawing conjures the Atlas of Greek mythology, *himself* being held up by an anthropomorphic *t*. Finally he can take a break from holding up the heavens—but will the single diminutive letter below be able to bear his weight for long? The piece oscillates between optimism and fatalism; a long search (For what? The love of a partner, a mother, father? A sustainable replacement for fossil fuels? A pair of factories to vacuum carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere?) has, at last, yielded salvation—but will she/he/it actually be enough to make a difference under the crush of expectation?

Rosen insists what *she* sees in any of her artworks is only its beginning—just enough to get it out her studio door. But her work really comes to life when it moves through the world, across time, and other people see and respond to it, piling their own experiences and associations into her pithy drawings and paintings in ways Rosen could never have anticipated. Such is the case with the three older wall paintings in this show—*Pendulum*, *The Shortest Distance*, and *Porous*.

Pendulum originated in 2002—Rosen was invited to participate in a group show called *The Greatest Album Covers that Never Were*. She had always loved Steve Reich and his piece "Pendulum Music"—but it had never been pressed into its own record, so Rosen designed its imaginary LP cover. She rearranged the letters of PENDULUM into PNUUMLDE to force a viewer's eyes to act out the motion of a pendulum in order to piece the word back together;

she also resized the letters so those on the outside were bigger than those in the middle, mimicking the arc a bob makes as it swings back and forth. After its appearance in that first group show, Rosen isolated her ingenious anagram from the rest of her faux album cover to remake it as a stand-alone work on paper—and later into a large wall painting. Over the years, it has become one of Rosen’s most iconic artworks, perfectly encapsulating her specific brand of wordplay: how she can make a word perform itself via clever formal strategies and simultaneously speak to a larger world of culture and history and current events.

The Shortest Distance, first imagined in 1999, is the only wall painting Rosen has ever made in pastel; it reads *theshortestdistancebetweentwopointsisastraightline*, underlined, in blue script with no spaces between words. The piece arose from her captivation with a blue chalk line she happened to see a construction crew snap onto a wall—its color, its texture, the ease and efficiency with which such a straight line can be made over such a long distance, all at once, with the simple pluck of a string laden with pigment. Pairing such a line with its Euclidian definition, all strung together in an unbroken line of letters, seemed to her to say something about political discourse and the different ways a single idea might be expressed—Occam’s razor as a meter for bullshit.

Porous comes from a 1990 body of work Rosen calls the Blocked-Out Paintings, in which she used black squares and rectangles to redact some or all of the letters in a word or two or three. Porous reads ■○■○■; another piece from the series, *You Lie Through Your Teeth*, looks like t■■■t h. The latter piece comes from Rosen’s memory of a prosecutor for the Tower Commission accusing Reagan of lying through his teeth by claiming ignorance of the Iran-Contra affair. This entire series of paintings dealt with the repression, censorship, and deception that seemed to pervade politics around the world in the late 1980s and how meaning can be built from partial bits of language. She wrote at the time that “the pieces attempt to function as re-signifiers of meaning rather than de-signifiers...that they hope to make sense out of nonsense...in spite of attempts to subvert or conceal [information].” Rosen demonstrated that bids at censorship, rather than limiting information, can actually expand interest and scrutiny—often

drawing attention to a repressive authority’s weaknesses and fears while helping critical ideas and creativity proliferate.

But no matter what is happening in the world when Rosen first conjures an artwork, showing a piece again after 20 or 30 years centers it in the context of the present moment. The three wall paintings in this exhibition seem uncannily prescient, given that they speak to the new supermajority at the Supreme Court, a deeply polarized electorate, the rise in disinformation and appetites for book bans, and the choose-your-own-adventure-style approach to truth that the personalized feeds of social media sites can afford its users. It was 1839 when the author Edward Bulwer Lytton wrote “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Similarly, in *FREE FOOD (for thought)*, Rosen reminds us that language—still the ultimate tool in both building worlds and tearing them apart—is equally deserving of both celebration and skepticism.

Kay Rosen, born in Corpus Christi, lives and works in Gary, Indiana and New York. This year she unveiled a major new wall painting for the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin) and in November will open an exhibition (accompanied by a new catalogue) at the Weserburg Museum of Modern Art (Germany). She has had solo exhibitions at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Connecticut), Art Institute of Chicago, Aspen Art Museum, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Drawing Center (New York), Dunedin Public Art Gallery (New Zealand), M.I.T. List Visual Arts Center (Massachusetts), Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), Otis College of Art and Design (Los Angeles), and University Art Museum (Santa Barbara). She has been included in shows at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (Arkansas), Hirshhorn

Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, D.C.), Kunsthalle Bielefeld (Germany), Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), Museum of Modern Art (New York), and Whitney Museum of American Art (New York). Some of the museums that own her work are the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney), Art Institute of Chicago, Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), Cincinnati Art Museum, Collection Lambert (France), Denver Art Museum, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Israel Museum (Jerusalem), Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (North Adams), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Milwaukee Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles), Museum of Modern Art (New York), New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York), Philadelphia Museum of Art, San Antonio Museum of Art, and Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art (New York). Kay Rosen was a 2017 Guggenheim Fellow, has been awarded three National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, and taught at the School for the Art Institute of Chicago for 24 years.