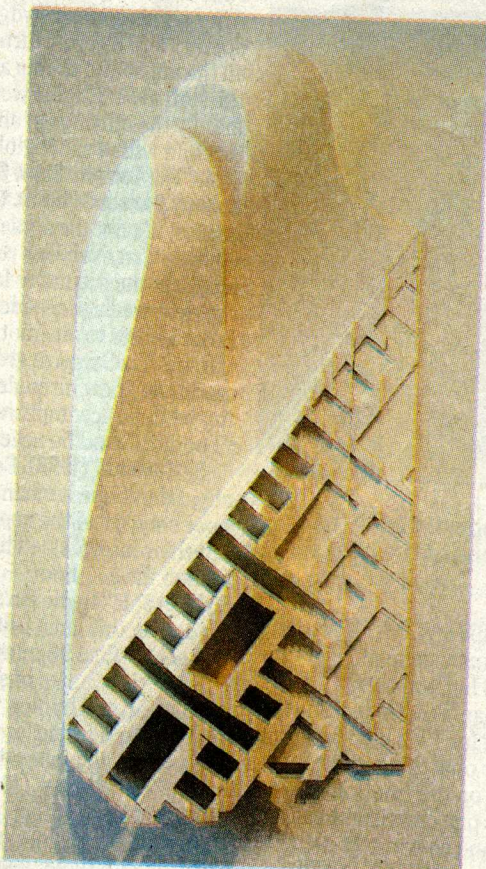


An idea for an art



CLEMENT BRITT/TIMES-DISPATCH

Martha MacLeish contributed this work to "Plane Text" at 1708 Gallery. She's one of 14 artists represented in the show.

If you go

What: "Plane Text" at 1708 Gallery, 319 W. Broad St.

When: Through July 28

Info: (804) 643-1708 or www.1708gallery.org

In a twist, the co-creators of 'Plane Text' first planned the show, then chose its theme

BY ROY PROCTOR

Special Correspondent

Most group art exhibitions achieve their power because the works adhere to a predetermined theme.

Not "Plane Text," which will remain at 1708 Gallery through July.

This 14-artist array began, in its originator's mind, with six artists and a search for a theme.

All six were acquaintances of painter Erling Sjovold, an art professor at the University of Richmond.

"This show began with the work, not an idea," Sjovold says. "I found the work of these six artists visually exciting and thoughtful, deep in an intellectual and poetic sense.

"With the original six, the possibility of a show became a means for me to try to understand my taste."

Then Sjovold brought in N. Elizabeth Schlatter, deputy director and exhibitions curator of University of Richmond Museums.

She added some favorite artists to Sjovold's list.

"There still wasn't a definitive point where we had an idea for a show," Sjovold recalls.

But Sjovold and Schlatter, who became co-curators, began to notice a common thread.

"There was an interest in work that played on the tensions between two-dimensional pictorial space, as in a painting, and three-dimensional space, as in sculpture," Sjovold says.

"The show seemed to be about straddling different ways of making art and seeing art and categorizing art."

He points to Maine artist James Mullen's small paintings, which combine oil with holographic film.

"Mullen's works straddle two different kinds of illusionistic pictorial space — the painted landscape and the distortion of that landscape

Art show

when it's covered with plastic," he says.

He cites New York artist Claire Watkins, whose work painted directly on the wall includes metal shavings that move, thanks to a motorized magnet behind the wall.

"Claire's work goes between painting, drawing and sculpture on the one hand and science and engineering on the other," Sjovold says.

Three of the artists are Virginians — Ron Johnson and Suzanna Fields of Richmond and Ben Pranger of Roanoke. The other artists live in Tennessee, Maine, Maryland, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana and New York.

Pranger, an Art Institute of Chicago graduate who teaches at Hollins University, combines his longstanding interest in coded language with sculpture.

"I originally worked with the Morse code, but then turned to Braille, an early digital language, because it worked so well with sculpture," Pranger says.

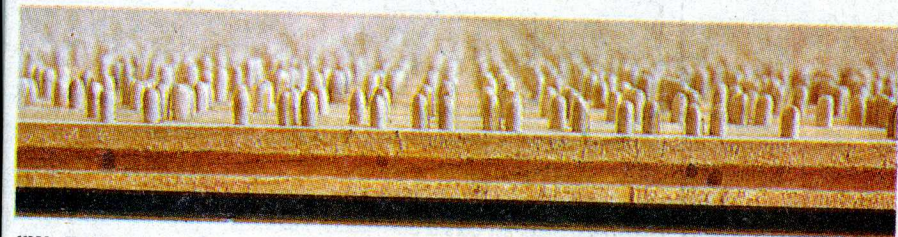
One of Pranger's meticulously crafted wooden creations, a 6-foot square that hugs the floor and is titled "Walk the Talk," presents a chain of synonyms in which 580 words in Braille link "walk" and "talk."

Above it hangs a chandelier in which each of the wooden rays emanating from the light conveys words in Braille.

Christopher Lesnewski of Jersey City, N.J., is straddling the gap between sculpture and painting in his colorful pedestal-mounted sculptures in which wood, plastic and papier-mâché forms are decorated with enamel, house paint and silk-screening.



Christopher Lesnewski of Jersey City, N.J., puts one of his whimsical wooden, plastic and papier-mâché sculptures on a pedestal.



"Walk the Talk" (detail shown), by Roanoke's Ben Pranger, hugs the floor like a rug. Wooden pegs spell out 580 words in Braille.