

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Luke Stettner: *ri ve rr hy me sw it hb lo od*

Avram C. Alpert

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Luke Stettner's current exhibition at Kate Werble Gallery, *ri ve rr hy me sw it hb lo od*, is a heavy show. I do not use the word heavy lightly. I mean it to refer not only to the centerpiece in the back half of the gallery, a several ton concrete sculpture, *Carrel* (2019), nor even to the fact that *Carrel* is an arrangement of four library carrels into the shape of a swastika. I use it also because the show directly addresses the weight of history: the fact that, somehow, we manage to live in a world whose sheer mass of atrocity is unbearable. It is in this gap between what we think we should be able to live with and what we actually do live with that so many of the works in this show dwell. Across the objects of Stettner's show—an assemblage of documents from relatives who both survived and perished in Nazi Germany, recent typewritten pages by the artist, paintings made by matchstick burns, and a series of collaboratively-made images and objects—one feels the artist and his community probing the formal and linguistic conditions through which we carve out this existence.

One classic mode worked through here is repetition—both psychic and optical. While it is jarring to arrive at the back of the show to see *Carrel*, it is equally unsettling to realize (via a compilation of images in a booklet accompanying the show) just how often carrels are arranged in this manner in public and university libraries. (Stettner writes in the press release that he modeled the carrel on one in his high school library.) The carrel in the gallery, we are told, was made there and will never leave there. But while the piece will be destroyed at the end of the show, a mold for the casing means it will be reproduced. Repetition is the primal gesture of trauma, as Freud had it: to repetitively recreate that which consciousness could not grasp in the moment of experience. The mind repeats to attempt to gain mastery over the pain—to eventually overcome the trauma. Stettner's endless plan for recreation and destruction suggests that such escape from the burden is not available.

It is perhaps not surprising in this space of perpetual pain that the works turn to two similarly classic modes of dealing with this condition: poetry and community. In the printed, haiku-like texts, smeared with ink and fingerprints and even child-like doodles, one sees the language of art at work trying to project the world that history forbids. But like the carrel, the words provide little solace, as in the staccato "couplets" of the show's title: *ri ve rr hy me sw it hb lo od* (river rhymes with blood).

Where repetition and language seem to come up short, however, communal activity offers the show's faint glimpse of hope. While our stumbling with the scratches and marks of language only pretend to have a capacity to bear the weight, our historical and present communities offer the possibility for forbearance. For what runs through the show is a sense that the only possibility of bearing the weight of the world's horrors is that we do it together. We get this from the familial objects, from the fact that many of the works in the show are collaborations (*Carrel*, for example, was made by Stettner with Tim Bearse, Will Cornwall, and Maxwell Stolkin), and from the inheritance of language and form themselves. Even if the works and words

cannot add up to the charred memories, the fact remains that they are the transmission of generations who have built what does hold the world together.

At the end of her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt recalls the unrepentant words of Sophocles: "Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came." But, she continues, Sophocles also reminded us of another possibility for our lives and language: the secret for "ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden: ... the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words." In *ri ve rr hy me sw it hb lo od*, Stettner and his collaborators put the polis, the city of the people, on display. With it, they invoke this fragile possibility of a shared space where our words and acts might bear the burdens of history.