

ARTFORUM

Luke Stettner at Kate Werble Gallery

Jeffrey Kastner

May 2019

Vol. 57 No. 9 Page 282

Rich in damaged detail, formally austere, and affecting in often unpredictable ways, Luke Stettner's exhibition at Kate Werble Gallery demonstrated both the potential and the limitations of language as a conjurer of personal and historical memory. The shows stuttering title, "ri ve rr hy me sw it hb lo od," sent an oblique signal about its organizing principles: incompleteness, misprision, false starts, and missed connections. Perhaps best seen as a kind of fraught, makeshift whole rather than a series of discrete works, the project argued that obliqueness should be understood as the default condition of all expression, whether linguistic or visual. It was densely packed yet surprisingly elusive, full of gaps via which the artist and his subjects continually slipped away.

At the heart of Stettner's enterprise was a family story of survival and horror, namely, the different fates of his relatives in Nazi Germany: His maternal grandparents managed to escape the death camps. However, his mother's grandfather, along with one of her great aunts, was murdered at Auschwitz. The more than two dozen individual works on view—including typewritten pages, burned drawings, collages that suggested the free associations of the studio wall, sourced documents and ephemera, an audio piece, a tiny photo, and a single concrete sculpture—highlighted Stettner's conceptual dexterity and ambition. But the profusion also had the unmistakable weather of fretfulness about it, marked as it was by a strange species of horror vacui in which the materials available to Stettner for filling up the emptiness he faced were also shot through with their own hungry absences.

Given the historical relationship between the gun and the typewriter—the first commercially available model of which was produced in the same upstate New York factories where Eliphalet Remington forged his celebrated firearms—Stettner's decision to type as a means of translating violence makes a certain dark sense. He is as much a poet as a maker of objects. *Explosion* (all works 2019), for example, is a Concretist work on paper in which Stettner uses zeros and dashes to create the effect of a falling bomb while *Dedication*, a list of relatives' names centered on a fingerprint-smudged page, echoes both memorial and bureaucratic modes of accounting. Throughout the texts, Stettner foregrounds his x-outs and corrections: emendations that suggest his efforts are tentative and provisional. Yet in *Calendar Page (Lydia Ausstein)*, such marks take on a different, more harrowing character: Each day of JANUARY 1939 was crossed off by Stettner's grandmother as she waited, futilely, for her parents' arrival in the US.

GESTALT (study #1), a collage featuring a grouping of tiny angular line drawings on squares of graph paper, provided a key to Stettner's ways of seeing. The work's title evokes the artist's attempt to put together the fragmentary evidence available to him, and the viewer's task of recognizing the scattered marks as a swastika, the form that structures the show. The shape can be seen in the awkwardly low-slung and angled display surfaces in the middle of the gallery floor; on a flag fluttering in the background of a small photo of Stettner's great-grandparents;

and in *Carrel*, a concrete cast of a four-seat library study unit—made in collaboration with the artists Tim Bearnse, Will Cornwall, and Maxwell Stolkin—that hulked menacingly in the gallery's back room. Yet the exhibition's emotional power lay in what was seemingly its most anomalous work—*Introduction to "Howl for Carl Solomon,"* a subtitled audio recording of Allen Ginsberg explaining to an audience his reluctance to perform his best-known work. Across two minutes and forty-five seconds of rhetorical throat clearing, the poet wrestles, as he often did, with the sense of duty he felt to read aloud the famous text. And when he observed that the performance necessitates "a certain openness on my part, and a sense of openness on the audience's part, too, actually, for transmission," one couldn't help but think of the exhibition itself, Stettner's own deeply personal lament.