

**Margaret Harnett *A Thousand Words*: opening speech**  
**05.09.12**

The question of the relationship between word and image has been posed in European civilization since at least the time of the Greeks. This is because the West, having adopted the Phoenician alphabetic system rather than earlier pictograph or ideogrammatic models of the Egyptians, has tended to separate language from the visual image. This has led to a focus in Europe on concept (signified) rather than the agent of conceptualization, the (signifier) or image. This in turn has led to a separation of the logos from visual field: 'It is written' becomes the criterion for truth, where visual representation is viewed rather as an illusion.

This problem is one that has been central to my research as a specialist in word and image relations during my time in Trinity College Dublin over the last 30 years. It has led to the publication of a number of books exploring the issue in relation to poetry and painting, to graphic design (as in the poster and postage stamp) and to the visual arts (both abstract and figurative). So it is natural that Mags Harnett's recent work should interest me, not only because she is one of my former students in Trinity College, but also because her work reflects an interesting aspect of the word/image problematic.

The word/image problem is one that became particularly acute from the Renaissance, as Modern European culture became increasingly heterogeneous as a function of the progressive over-layering of different cultural traditions. This meant that the seemingly more unified world of pre-Greek civilizations or indigenous cultures in other parts of the world - or even of the European medieval Europe world - became more complex: both Christian and mythical, both gothic and classic, both rational and spiritual, both textual and visual. The question of the status of the visual image in relation to language was therefore once more in the foreground of intellectual consciousness. But despite the invention of perspective and the perfection of techniques of mimetic representation in painting and sculpture, the visual arts were still essentially viewed as being secondary to poetry and literature. This was because language was still conceived to be the primary means of expressing truth – divine, rational or scientific.

A nostalgia for an integrated, synthetic, unified system of knowledge & representation, one that would integrate textual and visual media, has

however persisted within the western tradition. The desire to return, at least on the level of art, if not on that of rational expression, to a more unified world in which word and image would be fully integrated again has become increasingly apparent in the modern period. This is why Indian and Chinese religious, philosophical and cultural traditions are viewed by some as offering a solution. Since the time of the early avant-garde's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism - the word or letter form has itself become a central motif in the work in modern European art. We can see this in the work of major artists of the second half of the century such as Jasper Johns or Cy Twombly. The aim of these artists is to rediscover in the word or letter as image or signifier – rather than as meaning or signified – new forms of *visual* expression, and, in particular, a reversal of the signifying chain in which colour, form and rhythm govern the viewer/reader's response.

Margaret Harnett's recent works on paper using pen and coloured inks explore precisely these possibilities. Though commencing as a writerly project with the pen used to write words and phrases on paper, it quickly becomes the form and rhythm of the writing itself that is the centre of interest, as the large sheets are covered with a picturesque scrawl. The graphic richness of the completed work is the result of the application of various methods: writing over on the same line or on a vertical as well as a horizontal axis, which creates a palimpsest effect; the splattering of rain or the influence of the sun in fading certain tones; the accidents of graphic expression, ink colour or density, the overlaying of graphic marks. These effects create unanticipated visual interest leading in the end to the pages being viewed overall as works of primarily visual art. At the same time, the overlaying of letters and words lose in the process nothing of their scriptural and graphic richness. Nevertheless, the question of the meaning of words or writing becomes secondary in these works which offer themselves up to appreciation in terms of primarily visual values – colour, richness and tone; rhythm, texture, spatial form.

So, to return to my opening remark, I think it is fair to say that in these wonderful new works, Margaret Harnett both turns on its head and yet maintains the validity for the visual arts as well as for language of the old criterion of truth: It is written. In doing so she makes an original contribution to our reflection on and our pleasure in the word/image problematic.