

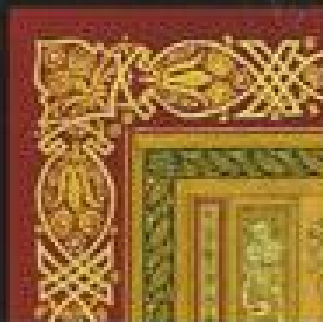
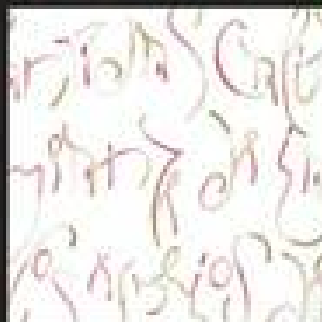
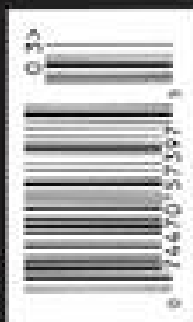
Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 26.3 • Explaining a contemporary Islamic manuscript • An interview with Marina Soria
A collaborative project celebrating our relationship to trees • An interview with Nicholas Benson



FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT MEMORIAL INSCRIPTION AT FOUR FREEDOMS PARK • Nicholas Benson

\$14.50



Opposite page:

Autumn book
17 x 17 cm
Gouache on Arches
Text Wove paper.
Binding by Carlos
Quesada on handmade
paper and Mexican
Amate paper.
2005

The text is an Arabian
proverb: "A book is
like a garden that you
carry in a pocket."

This page:

Blue Flowers
40 x 70 cm.
watercolor and walnut
ink on paper.
2004
Private collection.

This text is by Martha
Graham: "There is a
vitality, a life force, an
energy, which is
transformed into
action"



An interview with



MARINA SORIA

The work of Marina Soria will be familiar to many readers of Letter Arts Review, as it is regularly featured in our Annual Juried Issue. Based in Argentina, she is a prolific lettering artist who continues to experiment with new letterforms and techniques. We interviewed her this past May. The interview was conducted by e-mail. It has been edited in collaboration with the artist.

CHRISTOPHER CALDERHEAD: You had an extensive training in graphic design and education courses before you became a calligrapher. How has that earlier training affected your work as a calligrapher?

MARINA SORIA: My first education was in the fine arts field (five years of study) and later on in the graphic design field (three years of study). I then became a teacher at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). I will be forever thankful for my experience at the university, because while I was teaching graphic design there I discovered calligraphy.

At the university, I started as a teacher in the graphic design department and taught for four years. Later on, I went into the editorial design department for another three years, and after this I quit. I had two babies by that time and I

was working in my own studio, so teaching was too much for me to handle. Some years later, in 1998, I was called by the typography department at UBA, and they offered me a position as an associate professor of typography. I accepted even though I was pregnant with my third daughter. I set just one condition for accepting their offer: in the first fourth-month period I wanted to teach calligraphy. Since the director was desperate to find a professor, he said yes! I think this was the very first time that the Foundational Hand was taught at a university in Argentina.

It was a big challenge for me, since I had 150 students in my class. I had to think of many different ways in which to encourage my students by doing projects like designing a new logotype. My mind was definitely broadened with the exercise of correcting 150 different projects. I would say this was my best training, as the class tried to find as many different solutions as they could to solve the same problem.

While I was teaching, I worked as a graphic designer for almost 28 years. That taught me the importance of interpreting my clients' desires.

You once said to me in an e-mail: "Because calligraphy is practically unknown in Argentina, my work keeps on developing in order to be able to enter national contests. That's how I be-

Marina Soria divides the work shown in this article into three categories. The symbols below are used in the captions to indicate the category for each work:



Space / Counterpace

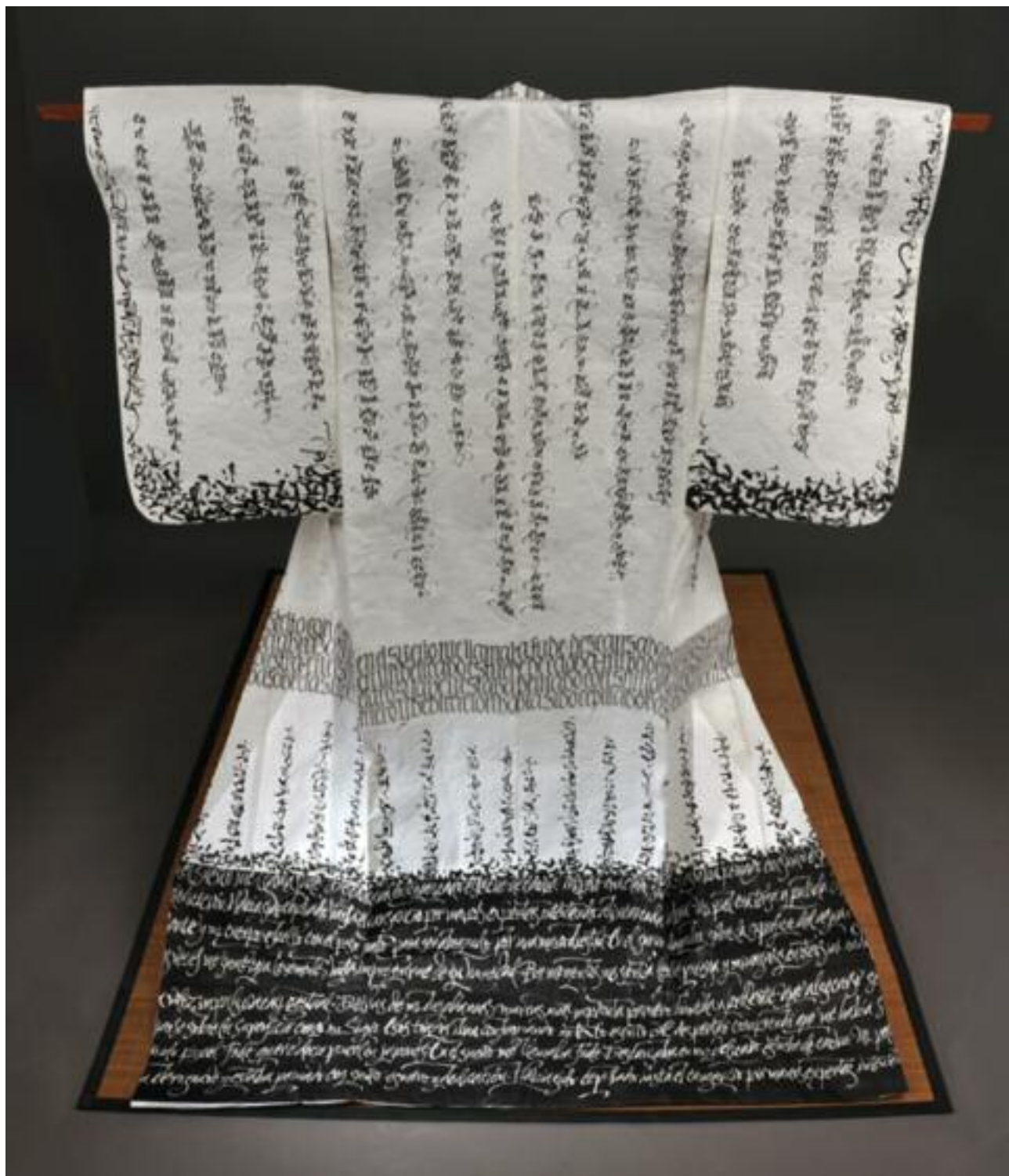


Calligraphy in Blossom



Textile Art





Fude Installation
 Size variable
 sumi on Magnani
 Bianca, Modigliani Neve
 and wrapping papers.
 Wooden hanger, stone,
 and bamboo mat.
 2012

The text is a poem by the artist entitled "In my Dream, my Name was Fude," in which she dreams she was a brush. The word "fude" means "brush" in Japanese.



Family bonds

22 x 36 cm. closed

176 x 35 cm. open

Walnut ink and gouache on Magniani Bianca paper.

Golden leave diamonds.

Japanese brushes, cola pen and nibs.

Binding made by Carlos Quesada with marbled paper.

Consertina book made of eight pages.

The serpentine can be removed from the covers.

2008

Original text in english from the Little prince by Antoine de Saint Exupery. It is the famous speech between the fox and the prince about the rose. The text, which is in the form of flowers, says: "Gustavo y Marina, Mora, Cata y Peki. Love"

This alphabet is the result of a workshop I took at the Black & White Conference in 2004 with Thomas Ingmire about Writing as drawing.



came involved in the textile arts field, where jurors could judge my work, since paper was accepted as a textile.” Can you tell me more about that? I must be interesting to engage the textile arts as a calligrapher—it makes you develop a wider point of view and speak to a broader audience. Does it make you stretch because you are working with both calligraphy and another medium?

To be honest, at first I thought I had lost so much of my life by studying things other than calligraphy. Once in Bruges, Sharon Zeugin said to me, “Marina, all the time you think you have wasted is exactly the opposite. You have what most calligraphers search for, which is an artistic and design background.” That left me thinking...

Regarding your question about my foray into the textile arts—since calligraphy is unknown and thus unable to be judged by knowledgeable people, I asked myself in which other art forms I could be included. My art is not painting or drawing, and yet it involves both those things at the same time. My medium is mainly paper, and paper is made of fibers. When I considered these fibers in terms of fabric, I found my place within the textile arts.

I created a metaphor by considering strokes or letters as stitches and the text pattern itself as a fabric. Furthermore, I could even expand on this metaphor by considering that, just like calligraphy, the act of weaving has traditionally been carried out in a female environment where women gather around a loom to chat and have tea while working. I find this kind of space is comforting and enriching for both people and art making.

I have been inspired by this quote by the textile artist Ruth Corcuera:

Thousands of years ago, when only the voice recorded small and big events of every day life, women would cover their newborn child in a wrap. In this we see a space created between the mother's womb and the world outside. We believe textiles were born from such gestures, within the realm of feelings and from a woman's view: to protect, to give warmth and to sustain life. In time, textile art will be the means to tell us through colors and designs that the world can be read through symbols, as in a written text. In the great American cultures these symbols were a kind of “lingua franca” and textiles a major art with many roles, among them to express [ideas] where words did not suffice.

At first I worked specifically with letters, trying to create patterns as if I were weaving. But this



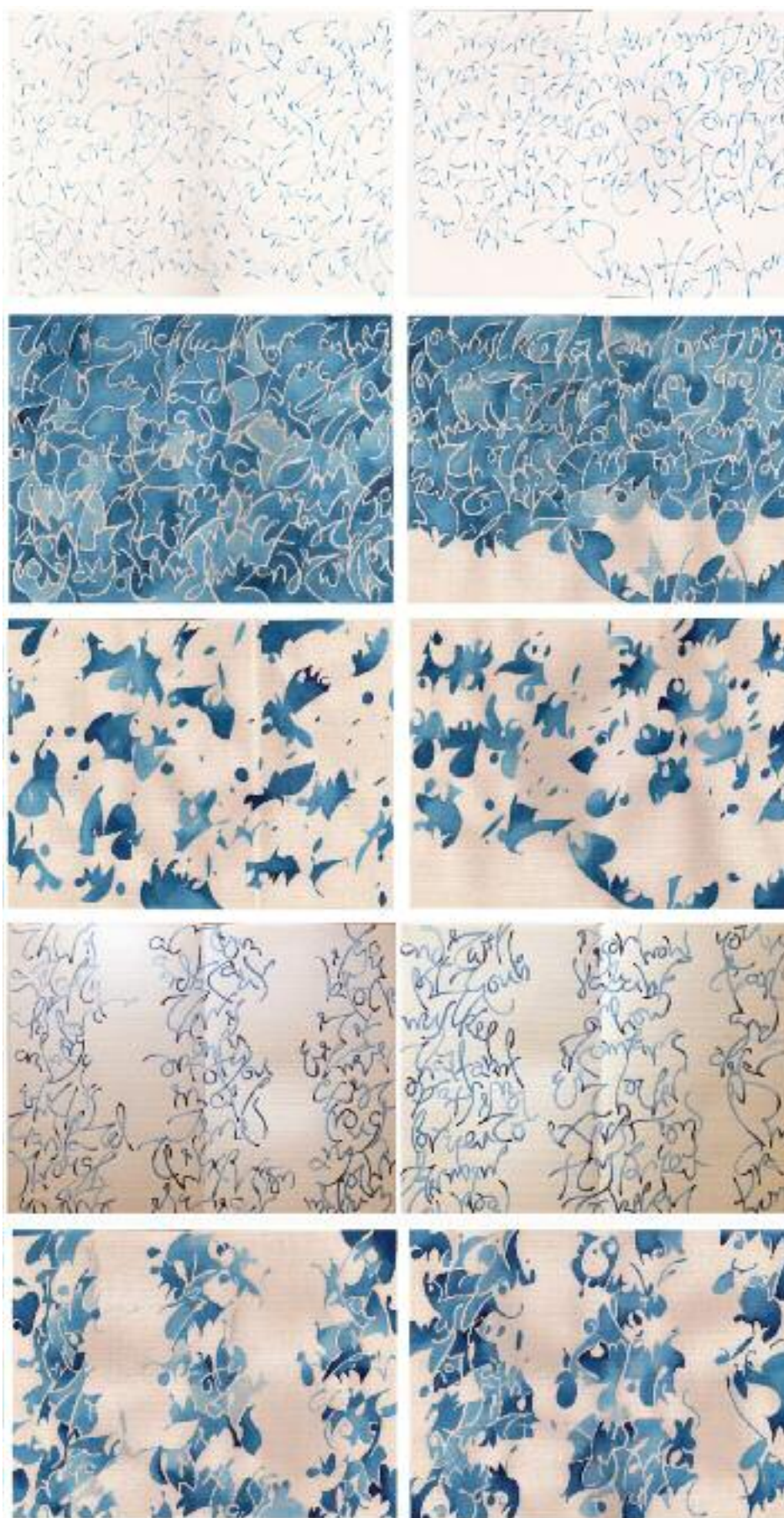
OOI
Deconstruction Book
21 x 28 cm closed
Gouache and gold leaves on
Arches paper.
2011

*From the top to bottom:
The book shown open;
a detail of the book's
protective cover; the
front cover of the book,
closed.*

*More pages are shown
on the following spread.*

DOI
 Deconstruction book
 21 x 28 cm closed
 Gouache and gold leaf
 on Arches paper.
 2011

This page shows the
 sequence of pages
 exploring the concept
 of shape and counter
 shape.





The Book fully open.




 Flowers for breakfast
 66 x 50 cm.
 Gouaches and walnut ink
 on Arches Text Wove
 paper. Japanese brush,
 nibs & folded pen.
 2008
 Private collection.

The original text, in
 Spanish, is a surrealist
 poem by the author. In
 translation it reads:
 “Flowers for breakfast on
 a solemn balcony of sun./
 Singing bread in hot
 slices like prayers./
 Smoking jasmine tea in
 the mirror of my soul./
 Expectant spirit in a
 newborn day.”

was not enough for me. Apart for my love for
 textiles from all cultures and traditions, as a
 painter (before becoming a calligrapher), I was
 very fond of found objects. I sewed or glued all
 sorts of objects to my canvases—nails, stones,
 boxes, old typographic stuff, things that had the
 mark of time on them. In my current work I
 combine letters, weaving, and found objects
 into a single piece of art.

At first I worked with poetry by other au-
 thors, and later on I began to write my own.
 This proved pleasing for me and conveyed my
 thoughts and ideas about life. My textile works
 not only allowed me to enter national contests
 but also to gain awards in this past year.

**What is the situation of calligraphy in Argen-
 tina? You say it's not well known.**

In the past few years, calligraphy has become
 known in the graphic design field. This was
 mainly due to the creation of the Calígrafos de
 la Cruz del Sur (Southern Cross Calligraphers)
 in 1998, of which I was a founding member. We
 wanted to spread the knowledge of calligraphy,
 and since most of us were graphic designers the

place to start with was the national university
 (UBA). Our work was well received, especially
 in the typography department, and still they call
 us to lecture and give workshops.

**Do you have a hard time finding clients for
 commissions?**

I do have a hard time finding clients, because,
 apart from graphic designers, people do not know
 what calligraphy is and what we are capable of
 doing. And I really enjoy doing commissions!

**Is it seen as a part of the graphic arts? Or is it
 seen as a fine art?**

Luckily, there is no dichotomy between art and
 craft in Argentina. If you use calligraphy in a
 logotype, you are a designer; if you use it in an
 artwork, you are an artist. It's as simple as that.
 We, as calligraphers, decide which path to take.
 Personally, I chose the artistic one, mainly due
 to my fine arts background. Nowadays, calli-
 graphy is spreading more and more in the world
 of graphic design.



How much do you have to educate the public about what it is you do?

I have to start from zero, explaining that calligraphy is nothing of my own invention but has a rich tradition in Europe and the USA. I also need to explain to people that calligraphy has both a formal and an experimental aspect.

You've taken workshops with Brody Neuenschwander, Ewan Clayton, Thomas Ingmire, and Monica Dengo (and others). Who has influenced your work the most, do you think? What insights have your calligraphy teachers given you?

My strongest influence comes from Thomas Ingmire, who I consider my mentor. In his work and his ambition to develop calligraphy for the 21st century I found the soil for my growth. In his workshops I always feel the challenge of searching for something more, even if I do not know what I am looking for. He has this gift of taking his students to a higher level, always going beyond.

In the same manner I find Brody's teaching challenging and interesting, especially in "searching for meanings." Ewan's workshops have taught me a lot about "the joy of movement." Also Monica has been very helpful. But definitely Thomas made the greatest difference. Once I told him that he has been as meaningful to my art as my husband has been to my personal life.

Being a student is one of the best situations I can find myself in. I deeply enjoy learning, speaking with knowledgeable people, discussing ideas, sharing, and exchanging thoughts abroad, since there are very few people to do this with in Argentina.

Living a busy life as I do—teaching, working, and having a family with three teenagers—I have very little time to experiment. A whole week dedicated to calligraphy is my dream come true, and it is part of my husband's birthday gift to me, since he pays for the flight tickets, which are always very expensive!

Let's discuss your idea of shape and counter shape—what led you to begin exploring this aspect of letters?

Many of the answers to this new set of questions as regards my "calligraphy blossom" and "shape and counter shape" alphabets could be answered if I tell you a short story:

In 2004 I attended the Black & White conference in Seattle. I took a workshop with Thomas Ingmire about Roman cursive in the 21st century. The results I achieved were very interesting and encouraging, but they were just the tip of the iceberg. In the middle of the week-long workshop, when I was almost wanted to give up because I could not achieve what Thomas was asking us to do, I had a moment of inspiration. Suddenly, my husband and his love for plants came into my mind, and so I began to experiment with a fusion between the shapes of nature and my letterforms.

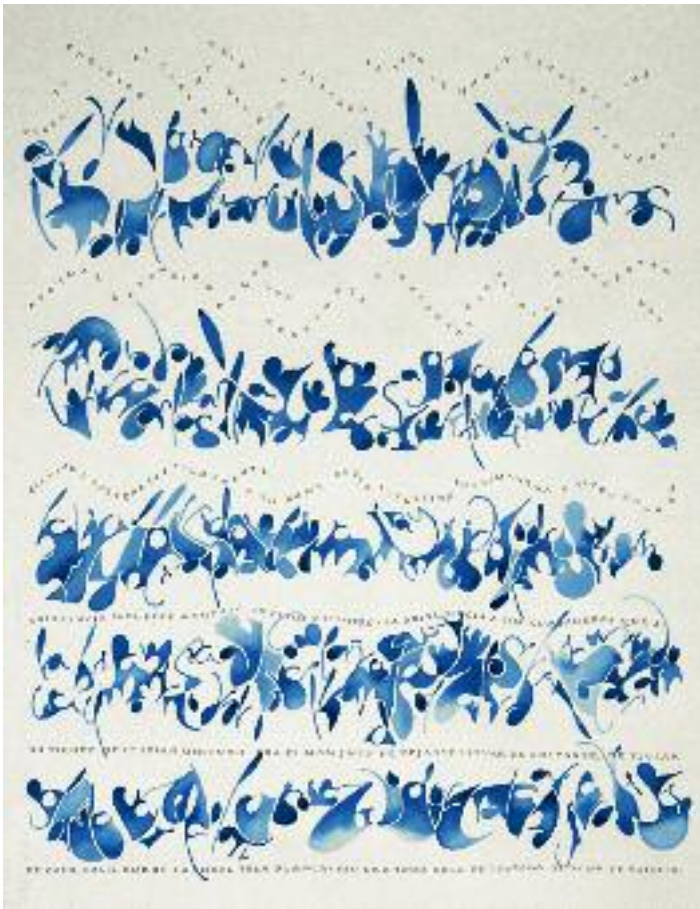
*Embroidered Gestures
Gestos Bordados
52 cm, x 27.5 cm
Watercolors and walnut
ink on Ingres paper.
Wooden box and
embroidery threads.
2010
Private collection.*

Right:

OOI

Divine Dissatisfaction
40 x 100 cm.
Watercolor on Magnani
Bianca paper:
2010

The text is taken from the book The Life and Work of Martha Graham. "No artist is ever pleased... there is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction; a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others"



OOI

Shadow of a cherry tree
76 x 56 cm.
Watercolor and walnut ink
on Arches paper. Brushes
and nibs.
2011

The text by the artist



Thus, my botanical alphabet was born. I had invented an alphabet based on shapes found in nature. I have recently begun to refer to these experiments as “calligraphy in blossom.”

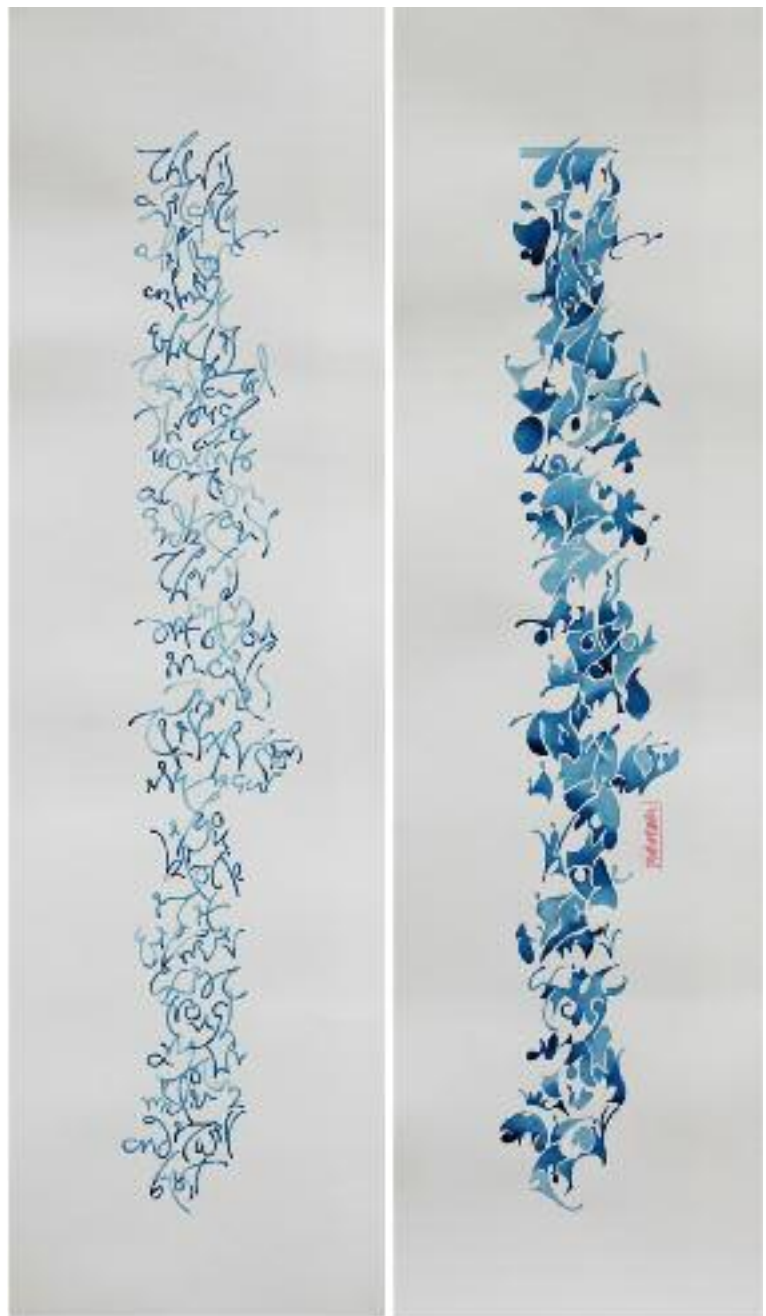
As I said, Thomas’ workshop was just the tip of the iceberg. There were lots of things I still needed to study. When I returned to Buenos Aires I went back to the project I had begun at the workshop. I knew I had to improve the sensibility of my strokes or gestures. Having this in mind, I took a year-long workshop in sumi-e (Japanese painting based on the Taoist principles of beauty). By that time, I didn’t know much about eastern art but I have always been deeply seduced by it. I completely identified with this new set of rules. The Taoist principles of beauty—empathy, vital rhythm, reticence, and emptiness—were not only applicable to my calligraphic works but to my life as well. In some strange way, I feel myself more related to Eastern than Western philosophy and I’m almost certain I was Japanese in some other life.

As I studied the concept of emptiness, I came to better understand my continuing interest in shape and countershape, the yin and yang. The sumi-e course gave me the tools and knowledge to improve my botanical alphabet, and later on it led me to the shape/countershape projects.

How do you actually go about working with shape and countershape? In your book *Deconstruction*, you take us through a sequence of explorations of a text. Can you explain how you made that piece?

I can apply this principle of shape/countershape to any alphabet, formal or experimental. As you see through my work, I prefer the experimental side of calligraphy.

I created an experimental alphabet and first focused on line (shape), stress, pressure to make stronger lines, thick and thin lines, and the study of the space between letters and lines of text. In the next piece, I focused on the background (counterspaces), coloring the whole background in blue. When I saw the result, I set a piece of tracing paper on top and drew the shapes I thought were most significant, ignoring issues of legibility or the meaning of the words. The fourth piece was made by choosing parts of the shapes and counterspaces and combing them into one single composition. In the fifth piece, I changed the direction of lines from horizontal to vertical, as in Eastern writing. In all these exercises I always kept the same size page.



000 II

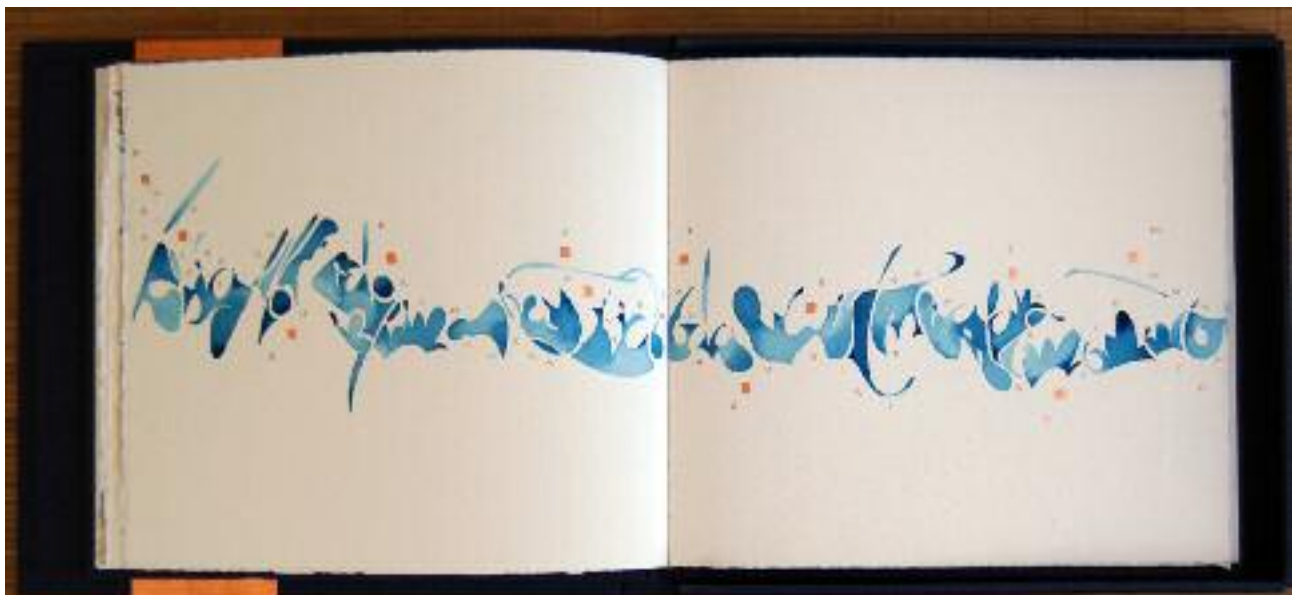
Life, force. Dyptic
60 x 100 cm.
Watercolor on Magnani
Bianca paper. Folded
pen and brushes.
2010
Collection of the
Contemporary Museum
of Calligraphy in
Moscow.

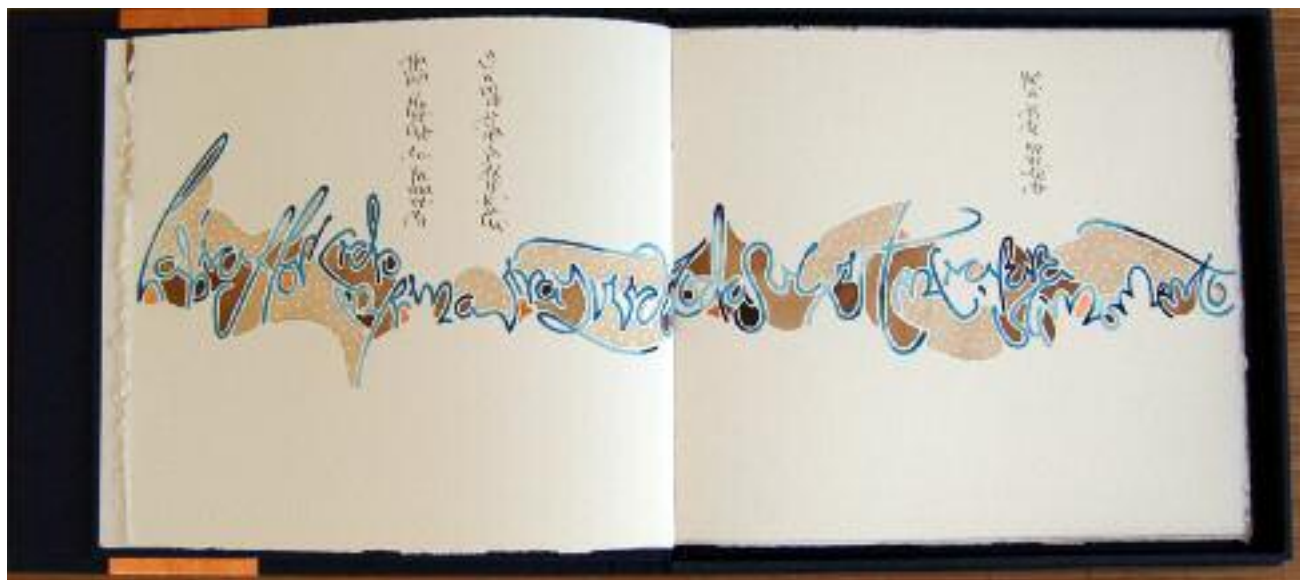
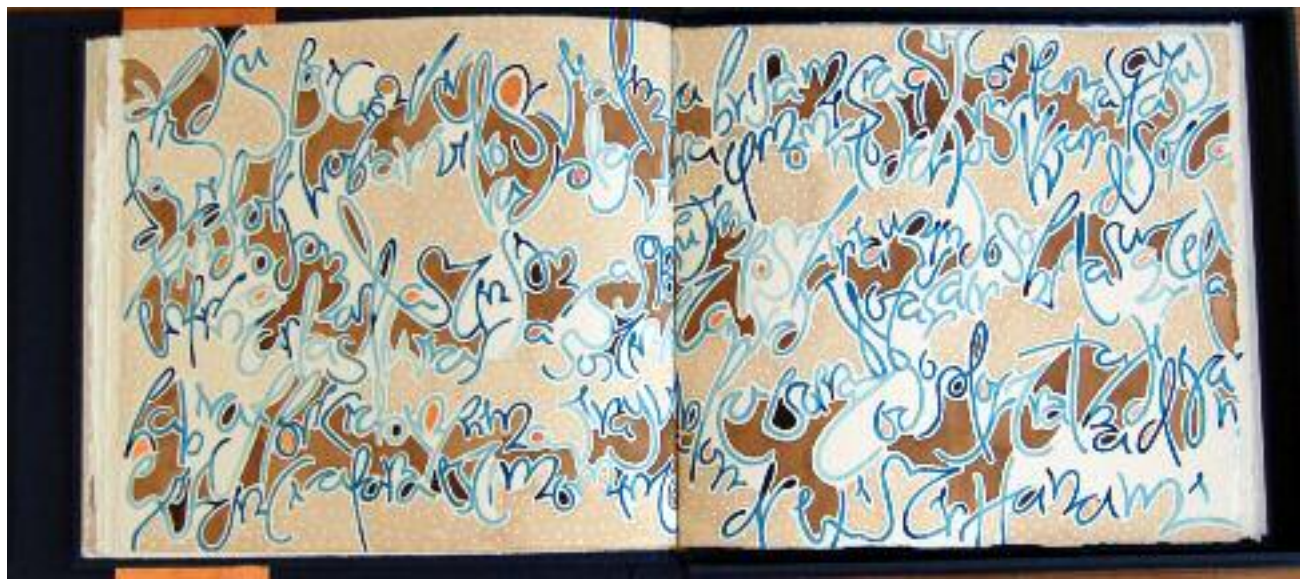
The text is by Martha Graham: “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy which is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all times, this expression is unique. If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost...”

OOI

Life Hanami
29 x 26 cm
Walnut ink, gouache
and copper leaf on Arches
Lana Aquarelle paper.
Binding by Carlos
Quesada.
2010

*The original text in
Spanish is by the artist.*







Finally, in the last artwork I decided to change the proportions of my frame to a vertical strip of paper, so the text was written in one single row from top to bottom. I thought the process I went through was quite interesting, so I made a book with all the pieces in the sequence of my process.

More generally, how do you choose the texts you work with? How important is the actual text to you?

The text definitively has a deep importance to me. I must relate to it in some way.

I love to think life through metaphors. A couple of years ago I took a two-year workshop in literature taught by a dear friend of mine, Andy Jauregui. While learning from her, I found out I had a natural feeling for poetry.

All the books I read for pleasure are full of underlining—whole paragraphs, selected sentences, or even just a few words. I underline any text, idea, thought, or feeling that I can relate to myself.

In the past, I would have an idea, and an image would come to my mind, a theme I wanted to “talk” about... but I didn’t have the words to convey that idea in a piece of artwork. Andy, who is a voracious reader and prolific writer and poet, is able to read more than a book per day. She always helped me to search for the words I needed. I would send her an e-mail with my images and the theme I was looking for, and she would answer back, sending lots of texts by different authors related to my theme.

Eventually the words of others were not enough for me. I needed to put thoughts, images and feelings into my own words. Mainly, I write about love, nature, my life, my girls, friendship, past memories, art, beauty, and spiritual themes. In general I relate to positive things; I don’t have images for negative things like war, hunger, or people suffering. It’s not that these things don’t worry me, they do! But I choose to believe in the healing power of art.

As in the Taoist tradition, I believe the function of art is to lift you up. As Luis Racionero says: “Art should not denounce, art should produce ecstasy. Art should work for people in their deepest levels of conscience and emotions, driving them to higher levels of humanity. A work of art, to a larger extent, could carry the viewer to ecstasy or samadhi, like a lamp that receives more power and can produce a more powerful light.” (This is my personal translation of his text.)

Let's discuss your “calligraphy blossom”



Opposite:

Weaving words II
Tejiendo palabras II
25 x 20 x 5 cm.

Gouache, watercolor and Walnut ink on Strathmore
and Ingres papers. Pointed nibs, embroidery thread
and wooden box.
2012.

Above:


Graphic textile
Grafia Textil
53 cm x 65 cm

Watercolor and walnut ink on Rives BFK paper.
Embroidery threads wrapping around a wooden frame.
2010

*The text is by the textile artist Ruth Corcuera and is
taken from the book Weavers of the Quichua Forests.*

*This artwork was exhibited in the National Textile Art
Show in Buenos Aires, Argentina.*




Spring book
17 x 17 cm

Gouache on Arches Text
Wove paper, Japanese
brush and cola pen.
Concertina-like binding
by Carlos Quesada on
Strathmore paper.
2005
Private collection.

The text is an Arabian
proverb: "A book is like
a garden that you carry
in a pocket."

works. You say these pieces use letterforms that are inspired by natural forms. What's your technique here? Do you work directly from nature drawing?

After the creation of my botanical alphabet and having gone through my study in sumie-e, I found the required theory to sustain my method and be able to teach it to my students. If I was on the right track, they would be able to find their own botanical alphabets, and they did! In fact, I'm now working on the organization of an international workshop of calligraphy in Buenos Aires for 2013 which will be called "Calligraphy in Blossom".

This is the method I have been using to teach this technique: I discovered that the starting point in the search for achieving new and original alphabet shapes is a key point of the process. If I start from letters or symbols that look like letters, the result will be pretty much the same. On the other hand, if I start from shapes that come from nature, for example, the results will be totally different. So keeping this in mind, I make my students paint an arrangement of real flowers in a vase starting with the whole composition. First they paint in a rather realistic manner. They study the flowers, leaves, and

branches, and they analyze all the parts of the flowers, isolating the different parts of the plant. They work with Japanese brushes and a cola or folded pen using walnut ink.

Later on, when they have some control over the tools and have mastered the shapes, I teach them the Taoist principles of beauty (empathy or resonance, vital rhythm or "chi-yun," reticence, and last the empty space or gestalt, a western concept). I encourage them to simplify their shapes through a series of time-limited exercises, cutting down the time of execution to less than a minute. This leads them into abstraction without their noticing it, as they have to choose which strokes are the most meaningful to build up a composition in the short time I have given them.

Once this process is over, the students have lots of exercise sheets. We then start working with the similarities between these shapes and the lowercase letters.

In some cases the results are amazing. The students deduce several shapes for the same letter, light- and heavy-weight versions of the same character, and variations for a single character, depending on the place of the letter within a specific word. These alphabets are extremely original and allow students to work



Sewing Nibs
Plumas de Coser
25 x 12 x 4 cm
Gouache, watercolor
and walnut ink on
Strathmore and various
papers. Pointed nibs,
embroidery thread and
wooden box.
2012

The poem written by
the artists, describes
one of her father's
habitual gestures.
"She recalled her dad /
Took a deep breath /
exhaling the air very
slowly / till her lungs
were empty / That
minimum inherited
gesture / brought her
back to serenity / and
recovered her from the
hussle / renewing her
energies."





Above:
A detail from
Sewing Nibs
Plumas de Coser

Opposite:
Life Force, Energy,
Action
56 x 76 cm.
Walnut ink, gouache
and bronze leaf on
Arches paper. Nibs
and Japanese
2008

The text is by
Martha Graham.

on various pieces using one word, a sentence, or a long text. We also work on the composition and its relation to the space and the frame. When executing the final artwork I encourage them to recover the spirit of nature, working more freely and paying less attention to legibility.

Summarizing my method:

1. The starting point radically changes the result of the exercise.
2. The playful aspect of painting opens the students' minds, and the feeling of joy in the execution shows through in the strokes and the compositions they make. This is the work of the right hemisphere of the brain.
3. Finding the similarities and coincidence between the shapes and the letters is the work of the left hemisphere of the brain.

How crucial is the natural environment important to your work? Or could you as easily have chosen, say, barbed wire or other patterns from the human environment?

I find nature is one of the most inspiring things in the world. For quite a long time I thought there was nothing more beautiful and perfect than nature and no human hand could emulate

it. Later on, I came to see that lots of artists did produce works of art as beautiful as nature. So I thought I could give it a try and transform the shapes of nature into letters.

In your piece *Sewing Nibs*, you have a beautiful inscription made in thread. How does making letters with thread change your approach to letter shape and formation?

Of course there are limitations, not only because the medium changes, but because I'm not a professional embroiderer. Maybe I will take a workshop in embroidering techniques soon. But to tell you the truth, every new challenge, like the one of being accepted in the world of textile art, arouses many new ideas. There is not enough time to produce them all, so I keep a sketchbook to record them.

I'm sure we'll be seeing the fruits of all those ideas in the future. Thank you, Marina.

Handwritten title in a decorative, calligraphic script, possibly reading "Handwritten Title".

Handwritten text in a cursive script, possibly reading:
The first step is to
make a list of the
things you want to
do. Then you can
start to do them.
You must keep at it
until you have done
it all.