

An Abstract Alphabet: New Work by Stephen Johnson

An Abstract Alphabet: New Work by Stephen Johnson, represents a radical and significant departure for this highly versatile artist. Stephen Johnson's longtime interest in and exploration of the alphabet as a source for creating artwork began with his seminal realist paintings for his children's books *City by Numbers* and which was accorded a prestigious Caldecott Honor and the *New York Times* Best Illustrated book of the Year award among many others.

Originally developed as a concept for a children's book in 2001, this alphabet series has evolved into a stunningly beautiful body of work. Expanding on Robert Rauschenberg's playful curiosity with new materials, Marcel Duchamp's concept of the "ready-made," and Jeff Koon's *modus operandi* of art as readily accessible, Johnson's *An Abstract Alphabet* explores new ways of pulling abstractions out of the real.

The genesis of the artwork for this exhibition and forthcoming book is the product of over six years of exploring English words in the dictionary and selectively organizing and consciously choosing particular words from each letter of the alphabet arranged in such a way that leads to a visual work of art based solely on the meanings of these words. In creating his art pieces, Johnson takes an ordinary object and makes it unfamiliar, removing functionality in order to reveal the potential metaphorical associations of the object.

Working in a multitude of materials and interchanging painting, collage, and sculpture, Johnson's wit and vision, through a unique sense of balance and restraint, tension and release, quicken in the viewer any number of powerful and illuminating responses. The visual strength of his images, their conceptual resolve as well as their overlapping and sometimes paradoxical meanings make this exhibit a stunning tour de force. The inherent dialogue between the abstraction of words and certain concrete realizations invite viewers to explore fresh and transcending realities.

Solo exhibitions of Stephen Johnson's work have been held at the Katonah Museum of Art, New York, the Cahoon Museum of Art, Massachusetts, and the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester, New York. His works are in the permanent collections of

the Metropolitan Transit Authority, New York City, the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut, and the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

A is for Art: An Abstract Alphabet will be published by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Children in fall 2008.