

ABBY LEIGH: SYSTEMS
BETTY CUNNINGHAM GALLERY

Text by Kathryn A. Tuma

*THE IMAGINATION OF THE WORLD:
ABBY LEIGH'S SYSTEMS AS SYMBOLIC FORM*

Systems propose sets of interconnected things, organized in accordance with logical orders designed to promote coherent knowledge both of the whole and of parts. Yet however much we may depend on our carefully plotted systems to guide us in our cognitive structuring of the world, the systemization of knowledge is never an innocent enterprise, as the forms those systems take always also work to produce meaning in complex – and frequently unpredictable and unruly – ways. The art of Abby Leigh pursues underlying philosophical problems of representational systems and their formal structures with gentle yet relentless force. Taking as her conceptual springboard subjects as vast and varied as geography, the history of medicine, and the natural sciences, Leigh's art launches questions into realms no less profound than the nature of human knowledge and the construction of meaning through systems of symbolic form.

OYSTERS

A core concern of Leigh's recent projects relates specifically to scientific representation, and her vocabulary draws on various aspects of its historical discourses. *Oysters* specifically engages with the genre of natural history illustration, exploring its use of text and image to construct a knowable world. In a realm where science meets art, and epistemology intersects with aesthetics, Leigh's *Oysters* plays with traditional conventions of illustrative plates used in scientific systems designed to classify and define the world of living creatures. Her art does not mimic those conventions; rather, invoking their primary precepts, Leigh manipulates their codes and languages in order to expose the subtle ways in which meanings are fashioned through them. Leigh's art poses fundamental questions about the nature of our knowledge of the world: how do we construct knowledge about a thing like an oyster? What place does visual imagination have in relationship to linguistic definition in systems of scientific intelligence?

The series is comprised of a group of exquisitely rendered species of oyster, each attentively differentiated by particular shape and coloration. In each canvas, the sumptuously painted oyster hovers over a ground of text, silk-screened in light gray, which reveals itself as fragmented but legible portions of the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "Oyster." The pale print floats in an indeterminate space, appearing to oscillate optically between a recession from, and a flattening return to, planarity with the canvas. As pictorial object, the oyster stands both on and in language, which serves as a kind of conceptual ground. Yet that ground, rather than defining or containing the object in any stable way, proves instead elusive and unsettled.

To say "language" generically, however, is to undervalue the conceptual significance that undergirds Leigh's use of this *particular* language. For this is not merely any language, but no less than the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of oyster: the *sine qua non* of linguistic knowlness in the English speaking world. The *Oyster* series deftly parses fundamental elements in the long-standing conflict between the use of text and image in the scientific symbolization of the natural world. Conventionally, language is prioritized by philosophy in its ability to name

and know a world. In *Oysters*, both literally and figuratively prioritized, it is painting that comes first: Leigh's process is first to render the painting of the oyster and thereafter to silk-screen the text. Traces of this process remain vestigially discernible; in places one can see language transgress into the border of the oyster's shell, language attaching to image like an oyster clinging to a rock, the little lines of letters floating and intruding into the space of the image "like tiny hairs," as Leigh puts it. Even as the painted image of the oyster commands the majority of the canvas surface, the hierarchy between the two domains is not simply subverted. Instead, the complex conceptual relationship between the two is pried open and laid bare like the soft body of that small mollusk which – with consummate appropriateness to the metaphorical sensitivity of Leigh's art – has come colloquially to stand for the world. In Leigh's world, language does not rule pictures, but nor do language and image stand apart. In three of the paintings, the text reads with easy legibility from left to right; yet almost as if to reiterate the point of language functioning here as "background," in another three of the canvases, the text is printed backwards – in a pitch perfect echo of Leonardo's mirror-writing from his notebooks dedicated to his polymathic studies of the natural world. And perhaps only someone who has studied the oyster with as much care as Leigh would know that oysters, too, have their own sense of orientation, a left and a right, a front and a back. Here, all the oysters are presented on the half-shell, held in the scoop of the left valve. And, just as language sometimes commences from the left and sometimes from the right, so too are the oysters sometimes oriented with the umbo – the more pointed, and oldest part of the shell – at the left and in other paintings lodged at the canvas's right edge.

Each oyster is framed by the OED definition, whose ambition is to provide a totalizing view of the object through an inventory of instances of historical use. The painted images likewise strive for a universal notion of "oysterness," even as each specific canvas carefully relates the particular distinguishing characteristics of individual and its species. Proposing themselves as the standard-bearers of objectivity, OED definitions nonetheless here begin to reveal their limitations. Leigh's selection of text hones in on one particular aspect of the conventional genre of definition, where definitions are less objective summations of a particular word's meaning than miniature histories of usage. Pasted from hundreds of texts, scientific and literary, culinary and esoteric, the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "Oyster" becomes as polymorphously perverse as the natural object itself. OED definitions, inflected in this sense, become less "definitions" than maps of meaning, deeply implicated in time and its passage. Indeed, they come to function as a kind of map of time itself, as the text traces the oyster through the vicissitudes of human history.

Rather than a reversal of hierarchy and prioritization, these pictures propose a collaboration of order and randomness in the generation of meaning and knowledge. The OED's definition is cropped, fragmented and abutted against the shell of the painted oyster; and the consequences for meaning are precipitated as much by the globalizing standard of the Oxford English Dictionary's world of definitions as by the randomness of its spread in the particular space of each canvas's corner quadrants. As quotes from Dryden to Joyce to Beckett are strung together like an oyster's prized pearls, Leigh plays with the fortuitous coincidence of word and edge, where meaning is made of accident and happenstance, and unexpected patterns emerge. Toward the far left edge of *Oyster* (#2), for instance, the phrase "morsel of dark meat" on one line comes to echo in uncanny ways in coincidental proximity with the words "tongue of the sweet morsel" on another. As textual lines congregate to form spontaneous neighborhoods of meaning, in this particular quadrant we encounter a condensed mouthful of the luscious,

gustatory pleasures the oyster offers to the tongue. Elsewhere the definitions dangle tantalizing implications of carnal delight and hints of potential dangers associated with the oyster's flesh. Importantly, in a kind of pictorial double-entendre, we are reminded that these "objects" – the oysters no less than the paintings – not only tantalize our cognitive faculties in our pursuit of knowledge but also present themselves for our sensual delectation.

Such moments of sheer aesthetic pleasure return us, with sharpened apperception, to the painted image, where we note, for instance, how the oyster's hard casing contrasts with its yielding internal muscle of mantle, gills and soft tissue. Shucked of its right valve, the body is exposed, cupped in the second shell. Leigh's is an artistic practice deeply compelled by corporeal vulnerability; her art thrives in the revelation of that which was formerly hidden or encased. Also characteristic of her world is the fact that we frequently find ourselves confronted in the moment of those revelations with a sense of deep visceral squeamishness. Looking at the *Oysters*, in the resplendent full-frontal nudity of their invertebrate flesh, one's palpable sense of their meat commingles with an increasing sensitivity born of greater cognitive and anatomical knowledge: in a moment of discomfiting realization, one slowly becomes aware that one is looking not merely at undifferentiated soft tissue destined for the tongue's delight, but at a tiny creature's heart, mouth, rectum and labial palp. All the while, however, alongside the captivation communicated in Leigh's pictures also comes a great respect for the remaining mysteries of that which has been only partly revealed – the recalcitrant unknowabilities of the things of the world. That radical unknowability is also cherished, and protected; it is also where visual imagination is born. Even as the soft, fleshy, sensuous oysters' insides are exposed to view, it is only their rough, irregular, encrusted carapace that language is able to meet. Metaphorically, in Leigh's pictorial epistemology, language only touches the outside of objects: the shell, although simultaneously functioning as the container for the exposition of the meaty insides of the creature, is also that which forms a protective barrier between oyster and language's encircling desire to capture and contain the object.

For as deeply as Leigh engages here with conceptual problematics in the history of scientific representation, these are above all paintings. The connection between color and the oyster is, perhaps, overdetermined (indeed, one portion of the text printed in *Oyster (#2)* includes the phrase "in a choice of three good colors" and, in another line that the artist has expressed a fondness for in *Oyster (#3)*, we read the words, "paint her with oyster-lip"). As the briny green of the oyster's shell intermixes with shades of brown, striations of the brush suggest both the fibrous nature of the oyster's internal musculature as well as the mucosity of its internal realm. The color white, as if a kind of connective tissue, functions both to represent the calcium build-up of the shell, and also the viscosity of the oyster's insides. Meaningfully, paint is metaphorized, too, as oyster-like. Matte and luminescent in turn, broad sweeps of the brush become iridescent expressions of a mucous-like substance; elsewhere, paint is scumbled like the shell's crusty surface. This is the work of a painter enamored of the tension between the resistant viscosity of paint and its limpid liquidity, both sticky and fluid – not unlike blood, perhaps. Leigh's quality of paint, curiously, is nonetheless distinctly not wet, despite its aquatic subject. The suggestive liquidity is entirely sublimated by the paint, as if to aver over and above the prejudices of scientific discourse: this is paint; this is painting's world; this is painting's ability to hold the world.

MAPS

For Leigh, pleasures of the mind are always deeply and meaningfully inextricable from the pleasures of the senses. Leigh's *Maps* present themselves as maps for the imagination weaving together threads of engagement with mind, body and world. From work like the *Oysters* series, certain themes continue: the artist's interest in the relationship between order and randomness, the part and the whole; her use of found objects (if one thinks of an OED definition as a kind of "found object") from domains of scientific discourse. As is true of the technical accomplishments of *Oysters*, Leigh's *Maps* also reveal the highest degree of technical sophistication and precision. The hand-made paper support specifically created for this series distinguished itself in its painstakingly precise preparation of hue, thickness and heft. The drawings as a whole involve an exacting meticulousness, mapping the watermarks of longitudinal and latitudinal lines with utmost respect to the placement of the incorporated images. The whole procedure results in surfaces complexly nuanced in both texture and dimensionality: the almost embossed quality of the imprinted lines adds a further element to the illusion of the world-like quality of these cartographic constellations.

Collected over time, the images pastiched in Leigh's *Maps* have been appropriated from old medical books, natural histories, and botanical texts. An inventory of the stunning array of images would include: various species of flowers and fruit, bones and raspberries, lobsters, jellyfish, snakes, fetuses floating in wombs, a depiction of a mastectomy adjacent to a sewn-up breast, an image of a tracheotomy. Copied and sometimes colored by the artist, the images are then burnt around the edges and sealed between the paper support and the skin-like, semi-translucent abaca finish, which, in turn, is scraped away in parts with a razor to reveal small windows or apertures of vivid clarity. The artist has explained that she found the cutting or tearing of the images inappropriate to the nature of the work. Leigh likes the randomness of burning, as well as the way the seared edges come to function as color, like the shading of the edges of coastlines in maps. The images hover, slightly raised, like land masses – geographies to be explored – floating on the plane of the world, even as the visual effect of the watermarks works to push back the images, rendering them increasingly inaccessible to view, veiled under the semi-transparent surface of the abaca.

Vertical in orientation, the illusionistic space of the *Maps* suggests an absence of gravity, as the arabesque patterns swirling and eddying among and around the imagery churn like oceanic currents skirting on continents to be traversed and re-imagined. Colored ink patterns encourage the eye to trace connections, but not as determinative or rigid designations or destinations. Evocative of the movement of liquids yet linear as well, the patterns are both amoebic yet distinctly not biomorphic. Free form, alternating between intensity and diffusion, the artist avoids the rigid plotting that would hinder the open wandering of the mind and eye, instead enjoining the beholder to range freely, as in a line from the *Oysters* series: "I remained in an oyster state, between asleep and awake..." Everything is swept up in the gentle urgencies of motility: never neutral, even the paper support curls in active participation with the images. With prolonged perceptual engagement, the currents also appear to change and shift as one discovers new details: one discerns how patterns of dots, for instance, intermixed with the inked patterns, are in fact not "dots" at all but tiny holes burnt through the paper with a wood burning pen.

Like *Oysters*, *Maps* play with the conceptual complexities of layering, yet in even more explicit ways. The *Maps* speak of this artist's deep engagement with questions of figurative and literal transparency, all coming into complex play in the laminated surfaces that comprise these drawings. "I am fascinated by bodies cut up like fruit, the matter-of-fact presentation of cruelty,"

Leigh has written. “I am mesmerized by the intricacies beneath the surface, skin that is hooked like a translucent curtain over the landscape beyond.” In recent conversation, recollecting a passage from a text by the medical writer Atul Gawande, Leigh’s memory made a curious and meaningful slip, reflecting the deeper structures by which her art operates in its use of images culled from scientific texts. The passage she invoked describes the experience of the surgeon wielding a knife: “When you are in the operating room for the first time and you see the surgeon press the scalpel into someone’s body and open it up like a piece of fruit, you either shudder in horror or gape in awe. It was not just the blood and guts that enthralled me. It was the idea that a mere person would have the confidence to wield the scalpel in the first place.” What Leigh recalled in the moment, however, was a surgeon’s attention in his experience to the physical resistance of those bodies he opened up with his knife. This taut resistance to penetration possessed by all bodies of knowledge provides a consummate metaphor for this work’s conceptual concerns. It also reflects the deep sensibility that informs not only Leigh’s sense of her own practice but also the art she creates: the radical intertwining of knowledge and feeling, of the exquisite and sometimes surprising bodily sensations that arise as the mind proceeds to go deeper in.