

Seeing Through the Surface

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Codebreakers have an acute skill of seeing or hearing what others cannot. Sometimes breaking a code occurs from careful looking and listening. More often, however, determining the method of the encoding itself undoes the secret messages. Lysander of ancient Sparta was able to decipher the message of warning about an imminent Persian attack by ascertaining that the unreadable note—written inside a servant's belt—could be decoded by wrapping the belt around a rod. During World War II, Polish cipher experts managed to discover and analyze models and drawings of the notorious Nazi code machine, Enigma, assisting the British and French codebreakers in deciphering German military messages.

The works of Lynne Avadenka, Robyn Stoller Awend, and Geraldine Ondrizek mine, reference, and poetically play with codes (primarily in the forms of letters and in relation to the body). In their work they fully recognize, in fact assert, the importance of both speaking or writing (coding) and listening or looking (decoding) in the production of any serious meaning. Across media—from prints to installation, books to collage—the artists all demonstrate a deep commitment to the codes that both unlock and give us meaning. The works themselves are excruciatingly delicate. The techniques are at once common and precious—sewing, bookbinding, letterpress printing, and embroidery. Interested in the genetically revealed truth of human nature that we are overwhelmingly similar and yet evidently unique, the artists in *Speaking in Code* address the viewer with questions, meant not to be answered quickly or lightly, but rather quietly and even endlessly. Those questions include queries into our sameness and difference, how our selves are encoded in our bodies, how memory can become form, and how we might bridge gaps across cultures, identities, and histories. In short, they each ask us to see through the surface of their ephemeral objects to the meaning encoded there.

A focus on language in the concrete form of text is one common interest of the *Speaking in Code* artists. Avadenka's *Tracks* series transforms pieces of German railroad maps, through cutting and rearranging, into stark shapes suggesting an ancient alphabet. The poignant and painful reference of the railroad scrutinizes both our memories and historical realities, suggesting the possibility of a pathway (track) to greater understanding between tragically tied cultures. In her *Root Words*, Avadenka collaborated with noted Islamic calligrapher, Mohamed Zakariya

to create a hand made book that through an intense engagement with the word explores the shared origins and cultural parallels in Judaism and Islam. In *Lamentations*, Avadenka draws on Jewish scripture directly to ponder disaster and loss. Stoller Awend's letterpress prints utilize the letters denoting the human genetic code (ACTG) to create images that evoke living organisms. In so doing the role of language in the state we know as life is animated and opened up for reflection. Geraldine Ondrizek is also interested in the letters we know as genetic code, particularly the way they can be mapped across time. In her M-168 books, Ondrizek explores our common lineage evidenced by the charting of the marker M-168 on the Y chromosome—a traceable genetic trait passed down through the male over generations. Not simply interested in the straightforward science of this fact, Ondrizek considers its more poetic possibilities, such as the idea that the passing on of this small piece of an existence might show that individuals do not ever actually disappear. Language's function in the construction of a story and the securing of continuity is understood by all to be an essential part of human existence that reaches beyond the physical specificity into a more spiritual and even universal realm.

In addition to their shared interest in language, the artists also call upon the human body to ponder issues beyond the physical. Of course, the genetic code refers to—in the form of mapping—the human body's literal inside structure. Awend and Ondrizek, while wondrous of that scientific detail, are not content to leave it as such. Each, in her own way, muses on the possible spiritual and less tangible meanings offered by the knowledge of and the code itself. In her *Torah Binder*, Ondrizek makes the body and its traces central to her own mapping of the physical and historical development of her own son, and through this an entire people. The binders are cloths used to swaddle infant Jewish boys after the ritual circumcision known as a *bris*. Using this cloth and the act of embroidery to mark her son's genetic code, Ondrizek memorializes his uniqueness and his connection to others across time. Ondrizek asks that visitors pick up and handle her M-168 books, asserting that reading is a bodily experience beyond the mental act of decoding sentences and images. Avadenka's *Tracks* mournfully recall the bodies moved over them, many to their eventual ends. Awend's wall installation, *The Ineffable Helix*, is a massive double helix form. The double helix, an overlapping sinuous twin cord, is the structure of DNA, the basic building block of life. Using pins, thread, handmade paper, and the shadows cast by the materials on the wall, Awend creates a marvelous rendition of the scientific form focused on the structure and the ineffable spark of life itself that is believed by many to reside there. The *Speaking in Code* artists present the body as at once corporeal and spiritual—a conundrum offered up for the viewers' meditation.

The overwhelming feeling in the gallery is one of calm and quiet. The simplicity of the works' materials, forms, and vocabularies, when considered beyond their surfaces, open up to deep wells of meaning. The humble objects now seem vast in their implications and feel perfectly placed for contemplation in this stunningly peaceful setting.