

שמות

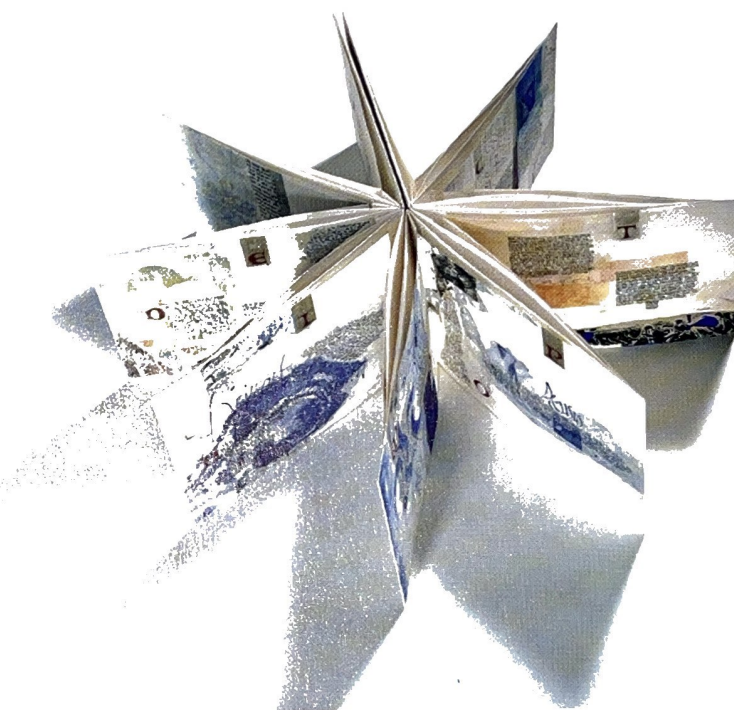


Hochst **A**n American is a guest for four days in Maya Huber's house in Koerst, a suburb of Frankfurt, Germany. Strains of Bach, and later Beethoven, mix with the fragrance of fresh herbs, filling the rooms of the warm and comfortable house, an adjoining flat to the Methodist church where husband Rolf is pastor. A diminutive woman with a warm disposition and broad smile, Maya is cooking delicious sausages, picking tomatoes from her garden, taking her guest on tours of the old city of Koerst, translating the conversation for Rolf, sewing two-foot-high Neuland capitals onto a three-story-tall banner for the church's flea market, working on a client's commission – seemingly doing all these activities at once with complete graciousness. Anyone else would be frantic.

But the guest is distracted. The house and the adjoining church are full of examples of amazing calligraphic art which make house and church into one extraordinary gallery. The pieces that most attract the eye are by Maya herself. She is too busy to lead the guest to them from her own initiative, but he insists. By the time he leaves four days later, he not only has made a fast friend but he is also convinced that Maya Huber and her work should be introduced to a larger audience than those fortunate to be within a several-mile radius of the Methodist Church in Koerst.

There is, in this work, the German tradition of course. It is a tradition at once steeped in a disciplined skillfulness, but also partnered with expressive experimentation. Her concern with generating emotional power through extreme contrast of weight and rhythm is in a line of descent that includes such masters as Hermann Kilian, Friedrich Neugebauer, Karlgeorg Hoefer, and Gottfried Pott. Her dense textures call to mind Rudolf Koch; her lyrical

line possesses the lightness of hand of Ernst Schneider. The solid German foundation, however, should not blind us to the internationalist influence. Her layering might put one in mind of Thomas Ingmire, the delicacy of her color palette suggests Anne Hechle, or perhaps Gwen Weaver. She has also been influenced by Anna and Arne Wolf in her use of sequence, through which she enhances a sense of narrative.



As in her home, so also in her work: music is everywhere. There is melody in the movement of individual lines, harmony in the textures – light or dense – which orchestrate the page, polyrhythmic beats pulsing through each surface, dramatic *crescendi*, whispering *diminuendi*, and everywhere the confident sensibility of being under the control of a master composer, inspired conductor.

Calligraphy may be, as Gottfried Pott put it, frozen music, but facing great calligraphy, one is also powerfully aware of being also in the presence of language. For

Buchstabenbuch, 2002
10 x 15 closed
Rice paper collage, mixed
media
Text: Fritz Usinger

Maya Huber: *of* Music and Stories

by Steven Skaggs



Akhnaten Collage, 2000
14 x 68 (36 x 170)
Diptych: 14 x 38 (35 x 105)
each part
Ink, collage, monoprints,
gold, gouache
Calligraphic notation of the
music of Philip Glass



Tucholsky, 1997
38 x 28 (100 x 70)
Ink on handmade paper

Maya, the music and visual elements will always be the undercurrent, but the text is her sailing craft. I asked her about her relationship with texts:

"There are criteria for texts, if they are to speak in a special way to me. I must feel that they are true and reflected by the poet –

that the life and personality of the poet is closed within it. One must hear voiced a wisdom, or experience of life, a message worth listening to. A suitable text will have history, tradition, metaphor, humor. Such a text has a color, a music – it is like entering a room or a world.”

Her work does not always treat specifically spiritual texts; nevertheless her work projects an ever-present spirituality in the broadest, most positive sense.

"There are so many words, we are reading such a lot every day and often we cannot perceive and reflect; there is not time for this. That is what makes our work as calligraphers so important!"

Reflection.

Contemplation. I wondered if by that she meant that she found calligraphy to be a kind of prayer, or alternatively, a holiday from the workday's frenetic pace. She asked for time to consider this question. Next day she responded:

"Last night I
thought about your

question and talked with Rolf. He was fascinated by your English expressions "kind of prayer" and "holiday." He mentioned that holiday means a 'crown of time,' the best time, the seventh day. And we agreed: calligraphy is both a kind of prayer *and* a holiday!"



Musik, 2000
22 x 28 (56 x 71)
Ink on Fabriano paper



Eichendorff Series, 1997
5.5 x 21 (14 x 54)
one piece from
four-part series
Inks on watercolor paper

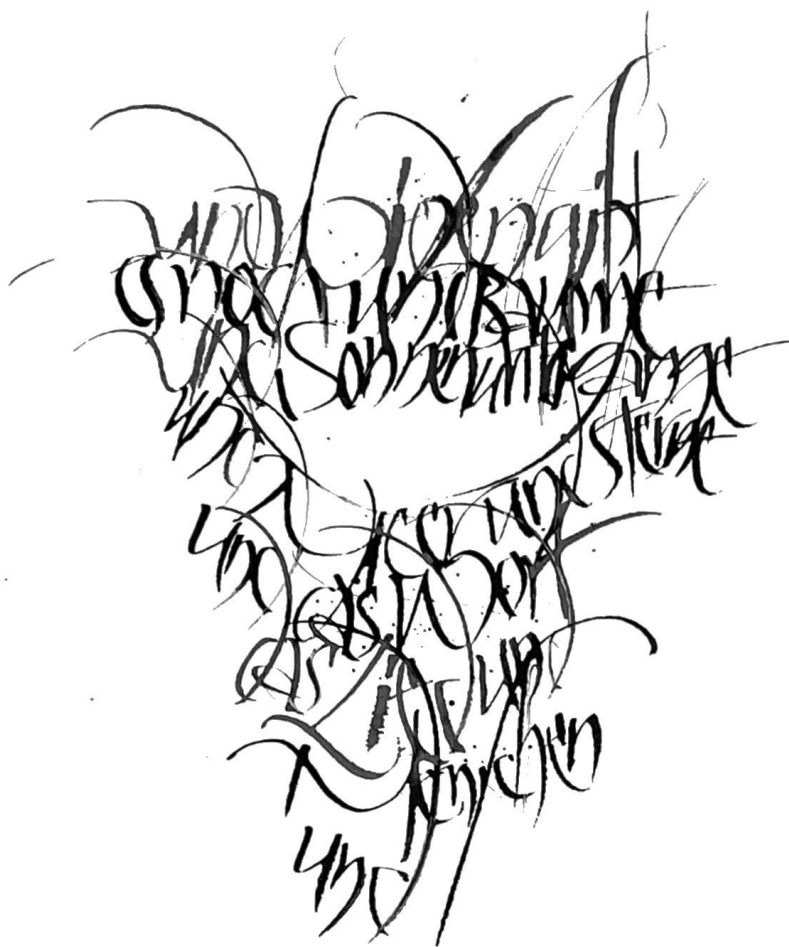
There are few professional lettering artists who make a living solely through fine art. Maya keeps a busy schedule working with design clients and commissioned work as well as her work for exhibition. I wondered how she approaches each type of work.

"When I have to do a commission, [...and] it must be absolutely legible, the letterforms must be really [perfect] and I [work on] them for hours and hours. But even in [such cases] I must find an individual style. When I try to write like the old

masters or in the kind of old manuscript [styles] it is impossible and not convincing – not true.

"But when I want to make letters [for myself], I am thinking of grass, of wind, of a meadow, or of music – I try to bring this inner feeling or this inner picture into the letterform. I allow it to come [through me] and then it is okay for me."

I asked, "Are you concerned that some calligraphers might say that text must always be served by making it legible, and not look like grass or meadows?"



rose ausländer

Und, 1997
38 x 28 (100 x 70)
Gouache on handmade
paper
Text: Rose Ausländer

Maya answered, "I would say, for this we have a wonderful instrument – the computer – and many fine calligraphers have designed wonderful typefaces for this instrument!"

In saying a few words about the pieces, there is no need to describe the lyricism of line, the subtlety of color palette, the inventive use of tools: Maya Huber's mastery is recognized immediately. But what may be less easily grasped, seeing them represented

here on the pages of a magazine, is the effect achieved by scale. These are large works. The viewer enters a gestural world that lives not at the scale of the hand but at the scale of the body. When you stand before the piece *Und*, you are facing work as big as yourself. You face it "torso e torso," warm-toned heavy art paper lavish and naked, the lettering epigraphic in its command of one's attention.

By its very stature physically, the large scale emphasizes the text's role as a dramatic utterance, but at the same time the large mass of writing invites inspection of the forms and movements that constitute it. The text is seen as a single physical force and concurrently as a product of a flurry of constituent movements. We are swept up into the work first, and only after do we begin to decipher its verbal content.

There is humor here, too. In *Schmetterling (Butterfly)* (page 7), shown in progress, the artist focuses not on the butterfly's appearance, but upon the character of its movements across a field of wildflowers. *Alask* (page 5) perfectly captures the drama and punch of sound and one cannot help but chuckle observing the entire letter *k* brought into formal analogy with the hyperbolic dot of the *i*!

Maya might return to a text or a theme repeatedly over months or even years, such as the radically different ways she has represented Philip Glass's opera *Akhmaten*. In both pieces she explores what it might look like if musical notation were to resemble the sounds it represents. An earlier piece is black on white, but the next year she returns to the theme and elaborates it in full color as a diptych paper collage (page 2).

Her work is music and stories. It is infused everywhere with narrative struc-



Maya Huber with a work
by Rudolf Koch at the
Klingspor Museum in
Offenbach.

tures. There are two kinds that she especially likes to employ: the sequence and the book. The former is represented here by The *Eichendorff Series* (page 5), the latter by her *Buchstabenbuch* (*Alphabet Book*) (page 6). Both allow her to explore themes and variations, progressions and repeated references. These works also bring the reader into a deeper awareness of the material of their construction and presentation. The *Buchstabenbuch* is able to be formed into a star, a long accordion strip, or conventional folio. *Eichendorff* is in four distinct panels placed about an inch apart.

I hope Maya Huber has the opportunity to travel soon in the United States. She has a great deal to share with us in America. But until she comes, I look forward to returning to Europe to see more of her work: well worth crossing an ocean for. **LAR**

Steven Skaggs is Professor of Design at the University of Louisville where he teaches typography, calligraphy and design theory.



Schmetterling
(work in progress)
20 x 28 (50 x 70)
Ink on handmade paper