

The Physical Labor of Writing

Many writers will tell you that writing is a physical activity. Renee Gladman's drawings convey that idea in a more visceral, less cerebral way.



Louis Bury March 2, 2023



Renee Gladman, "Grasses 4" (2022), graphite and oil pastel on paper, 22 inches x 30 inches (all photos by Filip Wolak, courtesy Artists Space, New York)

Even as Renee Gladman's well-regarded, category-defying writing practice has turned from writing proper toward asemic drawing, that work has been available mainly in book form. Her 2017 *Prose Architectures* — inky scribbles that resemble sketches of urban architecture, blocks of indecipherable handwriting, or both — was the first publication in this direction for a writer who previously was known for prose and prose fiction, including her peerless series of Ravicka novels. Two other artist books followed: *One Long Black Sentence* (2020) and *Plans for Sentences* (2022), both of which built upon her asemic idiom. Gladman's contemplative Artists

Space exhibition, *Narratives of Magnitude*, allows visitors to experience her drawings as material originals rather than published reproductions. This not only makes their physical labor more apparent but also shifts the associations her beguiling marks provoke.

The gridded suite of nine drawings displayed on the entryway wall, “Slowly We Have the Feeling: Scores” (2019–22), hints at such differences. Each drawing is rendered on black paper and contains blurry pastel shapes situated within and around spare constellations of white geometric lines. Some lines have arrows at one end and others have mathematical symbols alongside them, as if they charted vectors of energy across the picture plane. They resemble chalkboard demonstrations of cosmological motion, schematics of a universe whose machinations are equal parts mysterious and beautiful. Whereas the titles and contents of Gladman’s artist books reference language, here they reference extra-linguistic notational marks.

The other works in *Narratives* reinforce how presentational context conditions audience expectations for Gladman’s hybrid writing-drawings. Her *Grasses* series (2022), for example, bears a formal resemblance to many drawings in her book *Plans for Sentences*, with geometric blocks of oil pastel and gouache color superimposed on rhizomatic networks of graphite lines. Yet when viewed on the wall, they suggest architectural doodles rather than literary forms, particularly given the size and roughness of the 22-by-30-inch, deckle-edged white paper on which they’re made. Even when a drawing closely resembles writing, encountering it in person highlights the bodily effort Gladman’s practice requires, for instance, the painstaking attention to detail evident in the 60-plus lines of minute, faux-semantic white marks on black paper that comprise “Their Sleep” (2022).

Many writers will tell you that writing is a physical activity. Gladman’s drawings convey that idea in a more visceral, less cerebral way. The short explanatory texts that accompany them, authored by Gladman or others, eschew the neologistic labels often used to brand hard-to-classify work. Instead, the work itself functions as both practice and theory, drawing and writing, concrete marks on paper related, obliquely, to the abstract movement of thought. Whatever you want to call them, those marks are small gestures with large implications, dynamic mixtures of intent and accident that, as they accumulate, leave behind impressions of a person creating imaginative grammars for the actual world.



Renee Gladman, "Tremor Vector Still" (2022), oil pastel, pigment gouache, and soft pastel on paper, 30 inches x 44 inches

Renee Gladman: Narratives of Magnitude *continues at Artists Space (11 Cortlandt Alley, Soho, Manhattan) through March 18. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*
