

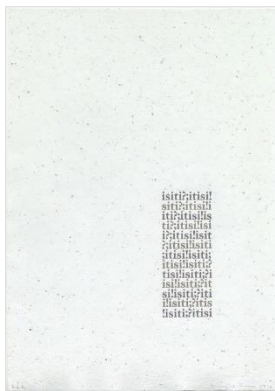


REVIEWS

Pressure and resonance at the Print Center with James Siena and artists who type

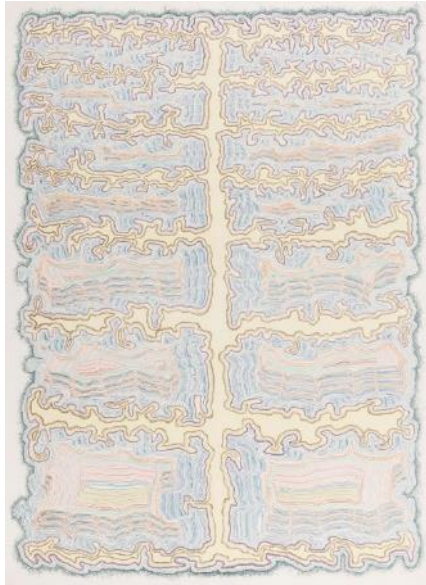
By Natalie Sandstrom May 22, 2019

Artblog's newest contributor, Natalie Sandstrom, visits "James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure" and "New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print" at the Print Center. Find out why she prefers the "pressure" portion of the exhibition, and read her praise for the curation of "New Typographics!"



James Siena, *is it I? It is II*, 2018, Letterpress on handmade paper with typewriter letter inclusions, 16 3/4" x 12 1/2" unframed, 19" x 14" framed, Edition of 44; Courtesy of the Artist and Dolphin Press & Print, Baltimore. *James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure*, 2019, The Print Center

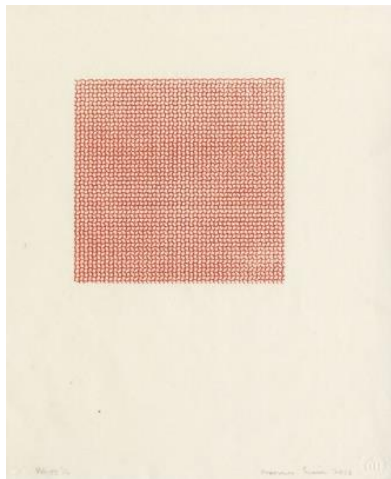
Upstairs at The Print Center, I am met with a faint clicking noise, and the occasional scratch-like accent. Turning right, I find the source of the noise: "James Siena typing at the American Academy, Rome" (2013, 4:43). In this video, no part of Siena is pictured, just the typewriter ribbon, typebars, and paper, resulting in a kind of mystical study: the page being typed seems authorless, and is made using a piece of vintage technology that younger viewers may have never utilized. This video is the first work that I spend time with in both the Siena show as well as its downstairs partner *New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print*. It is the first of many wonders.



James Siena, *Reverbatron I*, 2018, Lithograph, 40" x 30" unframed, 43" x 32" framed, Edition of 20; Courtesy of the Artist and Flying Horse Editions, Orlando. *James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure*, 2019, The Print Center

James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure features not only finished prints, but also a selection of various states of prints, matrices, and even the letterpress lockdown used to create "is it I? It is I!" (2018). The display tells a process-based story, moving from the chemical and mechanical, to the antique process of locking letters, through the perfection of the printing itself. Occupying two galleries, one room features Siena playing with edges: abstract, organic forms that spread over the sides of the matboard like spilling cells, or map fragments. This side of the exhibition seems to embody the "pressure" part of the show's title: the force used to imprint an image onto paper. The other gallery feels more connected to "resonance," featuring prints pulled from plexiglass matrices, painted in bold colors, with linework creating psychedelic labyrinths on the page ("Reverberation" series).

I preferred the pressure-related pieces. The room was airy and spacious, with central seating to contemplate the prints. I found myself lost in the impeccable linework in "Seven Radiating Lobes, Wandering" (2018). The work balances a simplicity of shape with complex internal details. My eyes wandered like the lobes – trying to work through the lines as though the piece were a complicated maze game. While *Lobes* has a sort of leisure to it, the "Displaced Non-Map Fragment" works challenge the boundaries of the pages on which they sit – bursting into the margins of the matboard, or being embossed so deeply onto the page they seem to tear through to a new plane.



James Siena, *Parentheses, Tesselating*, 2018, Lithograph, 10" x 8 1/4" unframed, 17 3/4" x 15 3/4" framed, Edition of 20; Courtesy of the Artist and The University of the Arts, MFA Book Arts + Printmaking, Philadelphia. *James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure*, 2019, The Print Center

Siena also created works that were symbol- or word-based, as in "Parentheses, Tesselating" (2018) and "is it I? It is I!" (2018). Both of these are graphic rectangular forms – one made of a repeating phrase, and the other of elaborately patterned parentheses. Each of those works has hard edges, but is quite rhythmic due to Siena's deft use of the text placement. He created works that, though made of words/symbols, did not ask to be read, but still told a clear story.

Downstairs, *New Typographics* capitalizes on this crossing of boundaries between word and image. This exhibition features the work of Lenka Clayton, Dom Sylvester Houédard*, Gustave Morin, Elena del Rivero, Allyson Strafella, and James Siena, and is composed entirely of typewriter prints. Typewriter prints are works made using a typewriter as the matrix, whether by punching the letters through the page – as in the colorful works from Strafella – or by typing to create word or pattern-based images – like

in Houédard's whimsical concrete poetry contributions to the show.

Ksenia Nouril's curation of *New Typographics* is elegant. The artworks are grouped by artist, but are not separated from one another in any way that shuts down conversation between them. Siena, positioned in the back corner, feels like a touchstone for each of the other five artists. Allyson Strafella's six colorful pieces give the space a richness. Her Rothko-like color blocks have an energy that keeps the show from becoming too architectural. Similarly, Elena del Rivero has used her typewriter to create textile-like pieces that have a softness to them. The neutral colors and sewn elements add dimension to a group show that, at its base, is about typing black text on a white page. Cumulatively, the selection of artists shows a dynamism not associated with typing — particularly in the modern age of a cold blinking cursor on a blank Word (or Google) doc.



Elena del Rivero, *Censored*, 2011, from the series "Mended Flying Letters", 2010 – 2011, Typewriter print with silk thread and graphite on handmade abaca paper, 29" x 21 1/4" unframed, 33 1/2" x 25 3/4" framed; Courtesy of the Artist. *New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print*, 2019, The Print Center

Ultimately, humanizing typography and printmaking are left — quite literally — in the hands of the viewer. Near the door of The Print Center sits a typewriter on a pedestal. A posted sign explains that this is a "Public Typewriter," and that anyone is welcome to try it out, leave a note, contribute to the page already loaded in the typewriter, or create their own print to take home. As someone who grew up in the digital age but has played around with typewriters in the past, I am always surprised at the amount of pressure needed to hammer the letter onto the page. On the day of my visit this was no different — it took me a few tries to effectively add letters to the sheet. I added my phrase to the other snippets: the word "blue" repeated over and over, and a pyramid of letters and symbols just on the edge of the page. This hands-on experience made the exhibitions relatable in a brilliant way. By experiencing the tactile, physical process behind the works on view, I was left with a better sense of the work of the artists, which seems to be what this pair of shows is concerned with. The typewriter gives visitors a moment to feel more a part of the work in another way, too: by being those missing hands typing away in Siena's video upstairs.

James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure
New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print
[The Print Center](#)
April 19 – July 27, 2019

*Dom Sylvester Houeinard (1924-1992) was a leading practitioner of concrete poetry. More [here](#) and see an image [here](#).

Bio

Natalie Sandstrom is a writer and educator based in West Philly. She works in public engagement at the Institute of Contemporary Art, where her mission is to deliver dynamic and accessible programs to all visitors. In addition to running the blog Beyond Art, Natalie has written for publications including artcritical, WHYY's Articulate, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, and the National Arts Education Association. She is currently working on a contribution to a book on museum salaries, which will be published in late-2019.

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