



The Print Center presents two exhibitions of typewriter art

The quick brown fox becomes an artist

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June 04, 2019 in [Art](#)

Typewriters are back. Resurrected from the office-equipment graveyard, they've been promoted to artistic pursuits, as demonstrated by a pair of exhibits at the Print Center: *James Siena: Resonance Under Pressure* and *New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print*.



A hyperkinetic life form: 'Feedback Loop Resonator, fifth version' (2017), by James Siena. (Image courtesy of the Print Center.)

Letterpress is not Siena's sole focus, but his application of print to handmade paper constitutes about half of what's on view. *Resonance Under Pressure* also presents his *Feedback Loop Resonator* series and other work from recent residencies at university printmaking programs.

Vines run amok

Feedback Loop Resonator, fifth version (2017) is a topography of day-glow crops, shifting and angling across hillsides. Vaguely rectangular watercolor plots are separated by thickly embossed white hedgerows. Bright colors are a Siena signature, and sinuous visuals that invade the canvas like vines run amok, as in *Second Non-Slice* (2006), which twists and loops without crossing itself, a hyperkinetic life form.

"I want to make stuff that's like a battery of mental energy that never runs out of power," Siena said in a 2013 [interview](#) with Julia Schwartz for *Figure/Ground*.

Though more structured, *Reverbatron I* and *Reverbatron II* (both 2018) are similarly intense fraternal twins. Each has two columns of squiggly rectangles filled with squiggly lines—one a symphony of shy pastels, the other a worrisome combination of darker, mottled tones. Maybe this is what gastroenterologists see when they sleep.

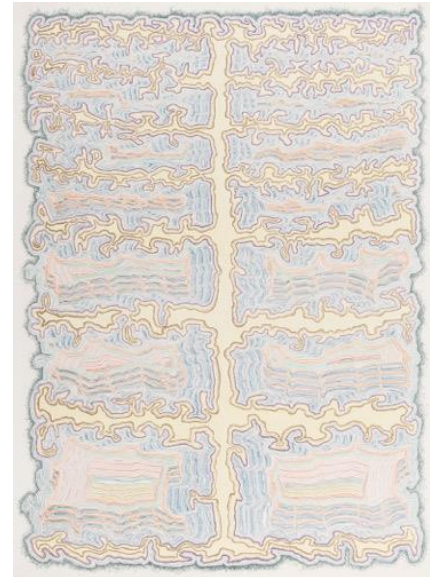
Showing the work

Siena, who works in varied media, eschews explaining pieces and discussing technique, but he doesn't mind showing proofs, printing plates, and a Plexiglass matrix for *Feedback Loop*

Resonator. A matrix is a form to which ink is applied and, when pressed onto a surface, transfers an image. The matrix here glows like opalescent lace, a work of art in its own right.

A small block of lead type hints at the craft behind Siena's *Is it I? It is I!* (2018). Repeated 13 times, the palindrome occupies just a bit of the field. In each line, Siena moves one letter from the left to the right margin, so that the phrase reads along each edge.

He repeats the technique in 2018's *Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor* (*In Rome quickly with its bustle you will find love*), but adds more color and texture. Printed in bold red letterpress on white, thick letters in *Roma* and *amor* create diagonal stripes, like a flattened candy cane. Again, the palindrome appears on all four edges.



A gastroenterologist's dream? James Siena's 2018 'Reverbatron 1.' (Image courtesy of the Print Center.)

Two hands typing

The clacking of a manual typewriter recalls the mundane process inspiring art. *James Siena typing at the American Academy, Rome* (2013), a five-minute video, resounds through the second floor. Siena is creating another palindrome, typing the numerals 1 to 5, then 5 to 1 in a steady rhythm, interrupted only by the *ding* at line's end, the *bang* of the shift key, and the carriage, shuttling to the next line. For those who remember, it's a symphony of nostalgia.

Novel, but not new

On the first floor, *New Typographics: Typewriter Art as Print* presents Lenka Clayton, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Gustave Morin, Elena del Rivero, and Allyson Strafella, who employ the typewriter as their matrix. Drawing with letters and punctuation marks, they reveal the technology to those who never encountered typewriters, and to those who never saw them used in this way. The art form is as old as the technology, however, beginning in the late 19th century. So while typewriter art is novel, it isn't really new.



Like a giraffe: Elena del Rivero's 'Stitched 1' (2011). (Image courtesy of the Print Center.)

The typewriter "was built to draft first chapters of novels and resignation letters; I use it to draw my son's eyelashes and knitted socks," says Clayton, whose typewriter, a 1957 Smith-Corona Skywriter, is 20 years her senior. Her *Edge of the Forest* (2016) is a minimalist work with a sense of humor: a mostly blank 8 1/2-inch by 11-inch page, title nicely centered along the bottom, is graced on the left by the tiniest tip of a pine bough.

Concrete poetry

Del Rivero's *Stitched 1* (2011), irregularly shaped pieces of handmade paper sewn together with wide seams of black silk, looks a little like giraffe skin. She's typed on the pieces, layering lines thickly, abstracting words into texture, more garment than document. According to

curator Ksenia Nouril, the text in del Rivero's work refers to events significant to the Spanish artist, including the dictatorship of Francisco Franco and the 9/11 attacks.

Dom Sylvester Houédard is one of two concrete poets featured. Concrete poetry creates pictures from words, using language visually. The most interesting image here, however, relies more on marks than words. *Untitled* (1964) shows a field of delicate, abstract objects—squares the substance of tissue, tendrils curling horizontally, and five vertical lines like the strings of a bass, with music ready to launch.

Try your hand

Visitors can tap out a drawing, or just a comment, on a restored Royal Typewriter lent by the **Philadelphia Public Typewriter Program**. Alongside the 80-year-old machine, the Print Center has helpfully provided a diagram and set of instructions (which will make those of a certain age smile and feel very superior).



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