

Roland Bernier

by leanne goebel

May 2011



A Word in Hand Series (Hi)

2007

Plaster, xerox paper, wood and plexiglass

51" x 12" x 12"

Photo: courtesy Walker Fine Art, Denver

Roland Bernier has been making art for 50 years. His chosen medium--words. While many of his artworks have specific references that are both verbal and visual, it's the complete shape and form of the word that interests the 79-year-old artist, who remains prolific, showing at Spark Gallery and Walker Fine Art in Denver. His upcoming exhibition at Walker, titled "I Gotcha Covered," features primarily work exploring the use of his own name: "BERNIER." When it comes to ideas, Bernier will mine them repeatedly.

"Ideas can be re-used for a thousand variations supplying the framework for a whole body of work rather than just a single piece," Bernier says. It's a concept he explores regularly through the creation and re-creation of the same form or word: a recent exhibit at Spark Gallery in Denver featured works made from cardboard letters and aluminum cans of beer, with the words "Beer Cans" spelled out in all caps using differing formats and arrangements

of cans.

Born in Providence, RI in 1932, Bernier joined the Air Force at 17. When his service ended he found himself in Austin, where he earned his BFA from the University of Texas. In 1960 he got his MFA at the University of Southern California, then returned to Houston where he began teaching art at the Museum of Fine Arts and the University of Houston. In 1966 he moved to New York and began experimenting with using letters and words as compositional devices, taking small drawings to a sign shop and having them created in metal wrapped around a wooden frame.

Bernier intentionally did not affiliate with the early conceptual artists using text to make art, such as Ed Ruscha or Lawrence Weiner, or with Pop Art, for that matter. Bernier considers himself an original, unaffiliated with any movement or group. His work contains limited thematic content; one of the most striking elements of his practice is that he does not use words to make sense or to reference contemporary culture. "Initially I felt I had to break down the barriers of making sense by just listing words taken at random from the dictionary and putting them on canvas and board, sometimes by themselves, at other times with designed or familiar images in which the words were covered."

"I always use the word as form," Bernier says. "Words are visual things."

When Bernier moved to Denver in 1973, he continued to use words and explore materials such as cut-up wood, acrylic paint, canvas and Plexiglas. In 2004, for a group show called "Retrospectacle" at the Denver Art Museum, he created a 4' x 8' sculpture by layering wooden words stacked on top of other wooden words, and created an 8' x 32' work cut from mirrored material, featuring random words--frown, observe, hat, nameless, diner, enters--which changed continually as people walked by and were reflected in the form. His 2007 retrospective at Walker Fine Art included hand sculptures made from plaster, paper and wood holding words; the letter "I" in one hand, "H" in the other.

In the last few years he's been making art with dollar bills, writing his name across them in a series called *Me and George*. He's also making frames with only his name in the lower left corner as a signature; one references Jasper Johns flag paintings by using small American flags to create the frame. "I'm going towards my name and the two together become the art form," he says. The reason for this shift is more personal than formal. He sees the end in sight and says that his upcoming exhibits in the next year or two will likely be his last. When asked, "What is your artform?" Bernier replies, with conceptual brevity: "My name. BERNIER." It's the final merger of the artist with his medium.

"Roland Bernier: I Gotcha Covered" will be on view at Walker Fine Art, in Denver, CO, from May 13 to June 18, 2011. <http://walkerfineart.com>
