

Art in America

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Nancy Dwyer at Cristinerose

For over a decade, Nancy Dwyer has altered spaces with large sculpted words and phrases. She transformed a public courtyard with benches shaped to quote John Donne—"No man is an island entire of itself"—and filled a gallery with soft inflated letters forming the word "ego."

In her recent New York show, Dwyer's largest sculpture was too large to read, even while one was standing before it. The gallery was divided by curving multicolored walls and posts reaching almost to the ceiling: a gently rounded lime-green wall, two gray walls that met at a sharp angle, and three columns colored pastel orange, pale blue and pink. Walking around the columns to the other side of the sculpture one saw that the gray walls formed two sharp Vs and the green wall curved to form a small apselike chamber. A computer-animated video revealed what the eye could not see: the walls were the sides of block letters spelling "UM . . ." with the three posts acting as ellipses. In the animation, the eye travels up the walls of the letters to look down at them, a virtual-reality vantage denied to the viewer by the ceiling in the real space. An Iris print repeats three stills from the animated short.

Also on view were smaller word sculptures, rendered in

other mediums. Piled on a table were blue-bound volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* cut to make the letters B, L, A and H; the books in the jumble spell out "BLAH, BLAH, BLAH." In Iris prints the letter-books float against a dynamic yellow background with the strong graphic appeal of comic-book art, the cynical phrase replacing the usual exclamations and sound effects. More subtle is a 3-by-4-foot rectangle of green sheet metal hung askew on the wall. A pattern formed by cutting the letters U and H around its edges makes a border whose shadow repeated the phrase "UHUHUH" on the wall behind. The work is reproduced in a slightly larger oil painting.

Dwyer's letters do not exactly make words. They are more like utterances that act as place markers when words fail. Her focus on words as empty fillers is clever; the sculptures are as inarticulate as we often seem. But it is difficult to tell if the bland computer animations and prints are meant to comment on the rote manipulation of logos in advertisements, or if they are simply unimaginative in design. The multimedia approach more often seems redundant than imperative, as if the artist were groping for the right medium.

—Grady T. Turner

Nancy Dwyer: Installation view of *Um . . .*, 1998, painted masonite, 10 by 33 by 8½ feet; at Cristinerose.



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