



Magenta... and Performance courtesy; the artist • Installation view courtesy; International Project Space, Birmingham, and the artist; photographs: Stuart Whipples

## Anna Barham

### Tangrams, prints and performance; the Phoenician alphabet, Roman ruins and Greek mythology by Colin Perry

The 19th-century proto-Surrealist playwright Alfred Jarry once said: 'We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish even the ruins. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings.' The early history of the 20th-century avant-garde would prove Jarry's point: the rubble of the past is indelible. The Futurists' kaleidoscopic visions were realized with oil on canvas; Dadaists proclaimed the death of art, but continued to produce it; writers broke language into pieces, only to put it back together as novels and poems printed on paper and bound in cloth.

In her recent exhibition at International Project Space in Birmingham, Anna Barham explored the conflict between structure and ruination. *Proteus* (2010) is an animated video work in which a flickering array of words rapidly appear and vanish, letter by letter, rendering them almost unreadable. Words such as 'negotiate', 'transmutation', 'granite' and 'tongue' seem to vanish before they can be registered properly by the human eye and understood by the mind. The order underpinning this shifting array seems, at first, entirely random. In fact, the work is a visual and textual analogue of the description in Homer's *Odyssey* of the Spartan king Menelaus' struggle with Proteus, the Greek god who could foretell the future to anyone who might capture him as he morphed between forms. Occasionally, I had the impression of seeing words that may or may not have been there: was that 'antelope' and 'spume'? Proteus - the shape-shifting god - is an apt subject for such quicksilver impressions (the adjective 'protean' is etymologically related to his qualities).

But there's another story here. The words in *Proteus* are anagrams of an enigmatic phrase invented by Barham: 'return to Leptis Magna'. The ancient Phoenician city of Leptis Magna, in modern-day Libya, is one of the best-preserved ancient cities in the Mediterranean, a city that was inherited by the Romans, and which UNESCO describes as: 'One of the most beautiful cities of the Roman Empire, with its imposing public monuments, harbour, market-place, storehouses, shops and residential districts.' It also took the fancy of 19th-century English aristocrats, who plundered and transported a sizeable chunk of it (including columns, entablatures and walls) to a park near Windsor Castle, England, turning it into a rather fetching folly. *Proteus* thus draws an unexpected equivalence between the city's architectural afterlife and the shifting wordplay of an anagram.

The Phoenicians are of course, best remembered for their alphabet, which colonized and replaced the written systems of much of the western world (the Greeks and Romans adapted it, and the printed words you are reading are its heir). Another work, also shown at International Project Space, hints at this phonetic morphology: a series of prints of numerals rendered in a sharp, angular fonts. Barham has created these from tangrams, a shapes game (popularized in the 19th century) whose geometric units can be arranged in endless formations. Here, they look slick and futuristic, but also awkward (one variant of the numeral '4' is almost illegible). Barham explored this

disrupted elocution in her performance *Slick Flection* (2009) at Arcade in London for which she read a fragmented text whose concrete logic derives as much from its spelling as its speaking: 'Ill verse ill verse ill verse sill ver sil ver silver'. Midway through her reading, a male performer (Derek Hartley) stepped up onto a specially constructed metal platform and started to tap dance. Clickety-click: the words became an incantation, the dance a rite.

Barham's performative texts recall English philosopher J.L. Austin's definition of 'speech acts' as formulated in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), in which he states that there are some utterances that are, in fact, actions. Examples of this include: 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*', and 'I take this man as my lawfully wedded husband'. This action-like quality is suggested by the platforms that populate Barham's installations, which take the form of minimalist, modular tangram-shaped units. Similarly, in her animated video work, *Magenta, Emerald, Lapis* (2009), which also consists of a series of words based on an anagram of 'Leptis Magna', plus the additional letters R, E, E and D, we see Barham literally 'doing things with words' as she arranges a set of tangrams into letters from the work's title, her silhouetted hands moving as deftly as a conjurer or card-shark.

When I met Barham in her London studio, she read me a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): 'If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs.' Barham's work suggests that our endless rebuilding of our cultural and linguistic rubble is an attempt to express this mathematically perfect knowledge, one articulation at a time.

**Opposite page:**  
*Magenta, Emerald, Lapis*  
2009  
Production still

**Below left:**  
*and ... reading and dancing ...*  
2009  
(A reading of *Slick Flection*, 2009  
with tap dancing by Derek  
Hartley)  
Performance at Arcade, London

**Below right:**  
**Background:**  
**'Tangram'**  
2010  
Relief prints  
Each 55x38 cm  
**Foreground: Posture**  
Chipboard  
Dimensions variable  
**Proteus**  
Digital projection  
Installation view at International  
Project Space, Birmingham

