

## **Todd Norsten: N O W H E R E**

**An exhibition of new monoprints, published by Highpoint Editions**

**By Betsy Carpenter**

To travel is to take oneself out of our comfort zone, and to begin to see with fresh eyes. While certainly a cliché, there is truth in this statement if the traveler is willing to jettison the customary hierarchy of experiences (historical sites, art museums, street and café life) and relax into a foreign place long enough not just to look, but to really see. For Todd Norsten, a “painter’s painter” who is known for his technical mastery and deep understanding of the medium and its history, the value he places on high culture and vernacular art and architecture is equally high. An avid outdoorsman, Norsten is as at home in the small towns of the Midwest as he is on the streets of Los Angeles, New York, and Rome, frequent destinations of his peripatetic life. Norsten’s passion for losing himself in urban and rural places has a common denominator that is largely invisible to the rest of us. Around every street corner, in every back alley, and down every country road is the possibility of discovery of homespun greatness—hand-painted billboards, hand-lettered logos on the facades of centuries-old brick buildings or corrugated metal garage doors, and handwritten diatribes posted on barroom walls, to name a few. Easily missed or taken for granted, these examples of the authentic yet unacknowledged artistry of anonymous individuals parallels the subject matter of Norsten’s art and his *raison-d’être*: the very human need to communicate, and inexhaustible drive to make art.

There is an instant shock of recognition on Norsten’s part when coming upon plain-spoken, and at times, surprisingly personal handmade messages in the public realm. That someone took the time in this digital age to put something distinctly and unabashedly analogue out into the world to get their point across is a constant source of astonishment. The materiality of the sign, whether it was stylistically painted with a readymade or original font, handwritten in pen, or created from commercially available plastic lettering, is of particular interest. According to Norsten, “The way it is made says more about the maker than the words that they are trying to communicate.” The sign’s eventual erasure or obliteration is visually and metaphorically fascinating to the artist as well. In these instances, it seems inevitable that all forms of communication eventually find an endpoint in abstraction, absence, and silence.

In a sense, Norsten might also be considered a painter of signs. What appear to be seemingly simple textual statements and images on unembellished or abstract surfaces present themselves to the viewers of his works as sign systems to be decoded, not unlike what the brain does when reading or processing symbols. In 1915, in an influential series of lectures given at the University of Geneva, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure became widely known for his theory of language as a system of “signs” in which there was a relationship between the “signifier” (the form the “sign” takes, be it a word or image), and the “signified” (the meaning, content, or concept it represents). At around the same time that Saussure was formulating his model of the sign, American philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce had reached similar theoretical conclusions while also stating emphatically that meaning (the signified) was always unstable and dependent on the perspective of the reader/viewer. When applied to Norsten’s art, these terms are quite useful in affirming that his works are vehicles both for

direct communication but also representation. They are open channels to multiple interpretations, including duality, futility, and meaninglessness.

For his series created in collaboration with Cole Rogers and his team at Highpoint Editions, Norsten's choice of the medium of monoprinting was a natural extension of his studio practice. Unlike other printmaking methods that require more time-consuming plate preparation and extensive proofing, the direct application of an inked brush to a Plexiglas printing plate allowed him to infuse his image-making with a certain amount of speed and spontaneity, and offered an immediacy of results that in turn, fostered experimentation. Norsten began by selecting various types of lightweight sheets of paper and diluted his inks or sprayed them with solvents so that, once printed, they resemble the artist's studio walls on which drips, washes, pockmarks, and palimpsests of previous works mingle. These sheets are then used as abstract backgrounds for collaged imagery and source material from which he hand-cut forms and lettering to be adhered to his compositions. But that which looks haphazard in Norsten's works is an illusion. He is a master at creating trompe-l'oeil effects—even the most random-looking mark is actually painstakingly created and intentional.

When encountering Norsten's works, the texts, which often take the form of short phrases, single words, lists, and truncated ideas, pull the viewer in. The tendency to "read into things"—to decode the signifier in search of the signified is a powerful one. And with textual forms, the reader, quite naturally, goes in search of an author. One might question whether these fragmented thoughts stem from the interior monologue of the artist himself? Or are they quotations from eavesdropped conversations? Are these voices of reason, judgement, cynicism, or soul-searching? Only one thing is for sure—Norsten has cast a wide net in gathering and archiving found, visual ephemera as he moves through this increasingly mad world and in so doing, brings all of the absurdity, disgust, poeticism, frustration, and humor in his intellectual and emotional arsenal together with his inescapable drive to be a maker of things.