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Sebastian Black, *Period Piece Simple Sequence* (2014). Courtesy Wingate Studio.

Sebastian Black

Period Piece Simple Sequence (2014)

Color etching and aquatint. Twenty-panel accordion fold in two sections with screenprinted canvas slipcase. 19 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches, folded; 160 inches unfolded. Each plate 12 x 16 inches, each sheet 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches. Edition of 20. Printed and published by Wingate Studio, Hinsdale, NH. \$7,000.

Sebastian Black's *Period Piece Simple Sequence* is devised in binary form: it can be viewed bookishly sheathed in Mark Tomlinson's handsome cloth-bound slipcase, or sprung out like a jack-in-the-box into two ten-panel paper sculptures that extend some ten feet. Mounted on high plinths and loosened in a leporello format at Black's solo exhibition at Paris's Galerie Balice Hertling (April 23–May 23, 2015), *Period Piece Simple Sequence* demanded perambulatory looking.

Black worked four large plates in deep aquatint and etching for the four separate sheets that make up each section. The sheets are trimmed inside the top and bottom plate mark to make a bleed, then folded and bound together

to make the leporellos. From the symmetrically alliterative title down, Black continues his dual premise, etching white on warm white ink (Section 1) and white on cool white ink (Section 2) for rectangular compositions drawn from commercial, mass-produced vinyl letter set sheets. These rectangular alphabet blocks are tilted and placed irregularly on the odd sides of the accordion folds for Section 1 and on the even sides for Section 2. Peeling off the precut sticky letters from their cellophane backing gave the artist his white-on-white palette and ready-made combinations of letters lacking words, a recontextualization of the manufactured Helvetica sheets in labor-intensive intaglio.

On the nonalphabet pages, Black dots his "first shape,"¹ the aquatint "black box" (in fact an enlarged Helvetica period), alone and in constellations. With a nod to El Lissitzky, the artist scatters black points that prompt saccadic eye movement back and forth horizontally.

Best known for his eloquent quasi-abstract "puppy dog" oil paintings, Black goes to great lengths to avoid being pinned down as simply a painter. His Paris show also included multimedia sculptures that referred to the city's Ministry of Finance building and an

obsolete desk commonly found next to Chase Bank ATMs. In his self-written press release Black described his conception of a folding screen that "orders space by obscuring disorderly shapes . . . for seeing through the given into the possible." He imagines the screen's opaque surface as a capacious, cerebral transparency—an antidote to the constraining power of the ubiquitous flat screen, the "black box" that governs so much modern looking.

Black packs a lot of open-ended musing into his writing, but consider the simplicity of the object in itself: a handsome, restrained paper sculpture made out of print, dramatic in the play of light across folds. "A sticky vinyl letter is flat until you peel it up and fold it . . . first and foremost a shape, ambivalent about the complimentary propositions," he writes. We do not need extrapolations on "meaningless stuff and stuffless meaning," as Black puts it, to admire. ■

—Kate McCrickard

Notes:

1. All quotations taken from the artist-written press release for 3 New Shapes, Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris, April 23–May 23, 2015.

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