



A CONVERSATION WITH ROBYN DANIEL

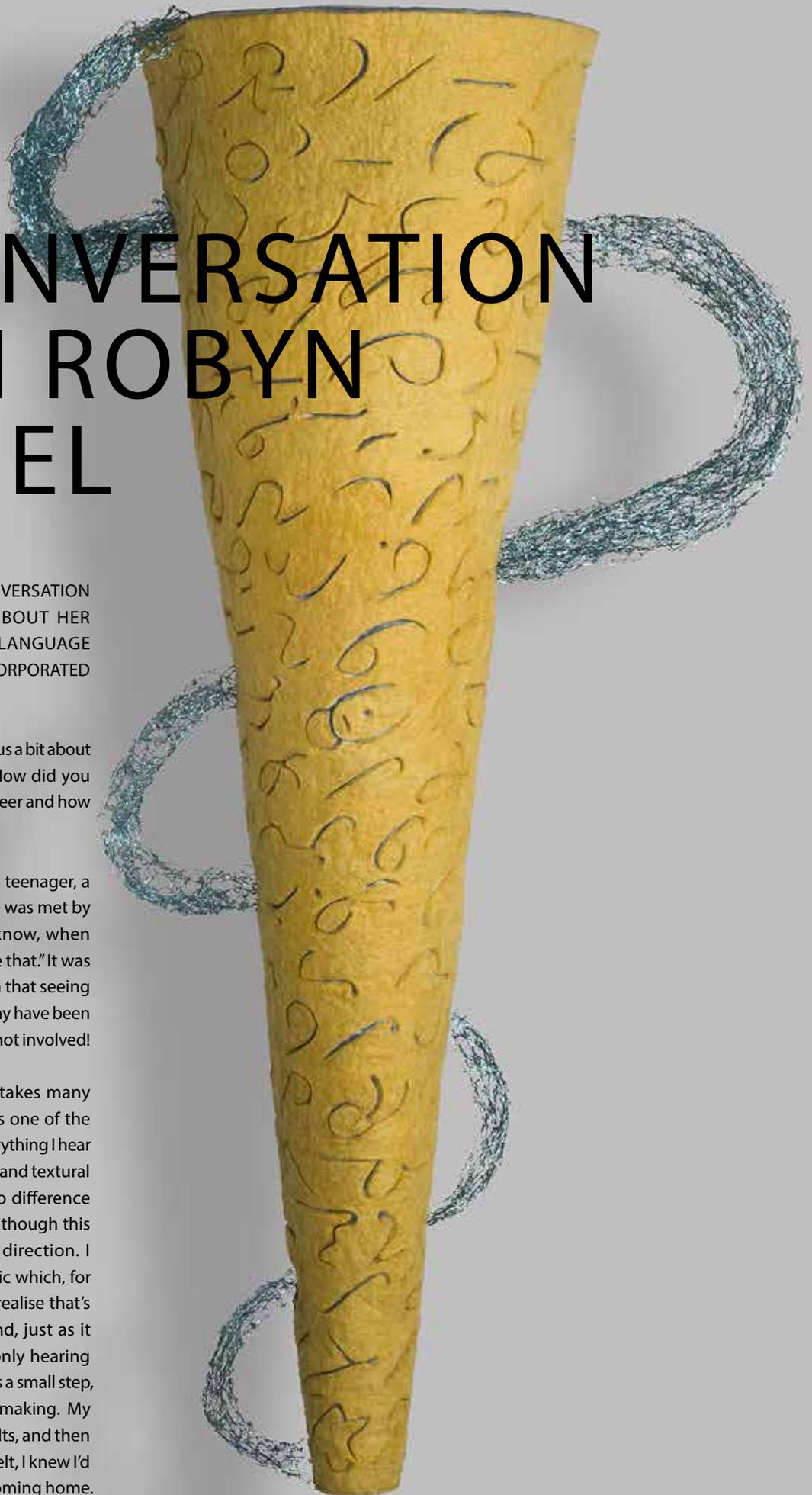
- CHRIS LINES

ARTIST ROBYN DANIEL, IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS LINES, TALKS ABOUT HER FASCINATION FOR WRITTEN LANGUAGE FORMS AND HOW SHE HAS INCORPORATED THESE INTO HER FELT WORKS.

Q Please could you tell us a bit about your background. How did you start your artistic career and how has it evolved?

A It's an odd story: as a teenager, a casual remark I made was met by a blank stare: "You know, when you hear this, you see that." It was a complete shock to me to learn that seeing everything I hear is unusual. It may have been the hippie days, but drugs were not involved!

Synesthesia (crossing senses) takes many forms, and "coloured hearing" is one of the two that I have. It means that everything I hear I envisage as complex, colourful and textural videos. It also means there's no difference between hearing and seeing, although this doesn't work in the opposite direction. I started out as a student of music which, for me, is the same as visual art. I realise that's hard for people to comprehend, just as it is hard for me to understand only hearing without seeing something. It was a small step, as a synesthete, to switch to art making. My work began with traditional quilts, and then art quilts. Once I made my first felt, I knew I'd found my medium - it felt like coming home.





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Q How did the body of works based on writing systems and books come about?

A Three elements came together: firstly, I love books; they are intimate as we hold them close, they make a sound as we turn a page, and they create a world which we can enter. *Evanescence* references the interactive quality of reading: Morse code is carved into the felt body, while the top wire section detaches and, with its internal felt balls, becomes a rattle - a nod to the sound of pages turning.

Secondly, when I started viewing contemporary artists' books, I learned that they can take any form, with some containing no words; *Drifting Into Down* and *Evanescence* are both sculptures and books.

Thirdly, in college, I started learning sign language which taught me that, although it is based on English, it is a completely different form of that language. That, in time, led me to Gregg shorthand, Morse code and other ways of writing English.

Q What materials do you use, and why? I can see that you often combine materials with different properties.

A I loved the freedom of experimentation in the art quilt world and carried that into felting, especially since I taught myself how to felt. One of my pieces has stitched condoms; some have wire; another has buttons. I love how wool draws into its depths, in a physical way, fabrics and other items. The materials are chosen based on their ability to support the concept behind each piece.

Q Please tell us about the special techniques that enable you to create some unique surfaces.

A Exploiting the distinctive properties of felt truly brings me joy. The ability to cut into it to expose inner layers, often of different colours, is frequently used both in my books e.g., *Interior Language* and in other abstract works. I have the nickname "concrete felter" for a reason: I make rock hard felt (usually in merino wool) so that it stays intact as I cut, using very small, bent-handled scissors. I'm mining the depths for words, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Felt's surface invites exploration. I love to use wire,

a line in space whose bright surface plays against wool's matte one, the interplay of hard against soft.

Q What is the meaning of these works for you, and how do you envisage the response of the viewer?

A Much of my work explores communication. We make assumptions when we communicate, and sometimes the message received isn't exactly what was intended. *Admonition or Meditation #1* can be interpreted as a warning or as a mantra - or as something else completely.

I chanced upon a Gregg shorthand manual in a secondhand bookshop. The shapes of the script are beautiful to me, especially since they are actual words conveying a message. I don't read shorthand or Morse code (nor do I have plans to), so once a piece is finished, the words are simply shapes. I do have sketchbooks with "translations", but rarely refer to them.

I feel a bit uneasy knowing that some intimate writings, whether mine or others' as in *Confession #1*, are in full view. The writing is there but the message cannot be



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understood by most people. Although it is rare that someone can read it, I have had instances of viewers translating my words for me! Other viewers make the assumption that the shorthand is Arabic, or some other language.

I have no expectations of what others see in my work since each viewer will see the art with - literally - a different set of eyes, and with an interpretation that has meaning only for them. I hope that the art captures their attention for a moment or two, with some thought about the why.

Q What are your main design or artistic influences?

A As time passes, I am drawn increasingly to Minimalism; how to create the simplest of pieces whilst retaining the meaning? Markings #4: Echoes of Dreams is a step towards that goal, with ten straight stitches in each section. The number reflects our fingers, which I can only guess was our earliest way of counting.

Minimalist artists such as Lucio Fontana, Fred Sandback and Robert Ryman amaze me with their self-imposed limitations only enhancing their works. Other artists using some type of writing, such as Cy Twombly, Mira Schendel and Leon Ferrari, help me use words for their shapes, not their meanings. Ruth Asawa and Nancy Koenigsberg (a teacher of mine) show me the possibilities of using wire. And the world of felting, both past and current, inspires me with ways to use wool.

Q How did your work with these pieces develop and progress?

A My work begins with meaning, and then form follows. For example, Drifting Into Down was inspired by the ocean which is an important part of my life, and the carved shorthand is all quotations about water. The undulating blue wire references water's movement, and when the piece is hanging, air flow will make it move.

Q Do you exhibit your work?

A I've exhibited both here in the U.S. and overseas, and received some awards. I've been lucky to be included in a number of books, some felt-based, some book-based. My Markings series was shown at a gallery but, as the number has grown since then (currently at number 22), I look forward to seeing them all together in another venue.

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IMAGES

- Page 8) Drifting Into Down
- 1) Admonition or Meditation #1
- 2) Interior Language
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