

HoustonPress

Arts

Contemplative Spaces

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Matthew Sontheimer has created affectionately conceptual works from a map of his hometown of New Orleans and a drawing of his third-grade shoe. His appealing blend of elaborate concept and melancholic nostalgia continues in an untitled exhibit at Devin Borden/Hiram Butler Gallery, where his small drawings of snaking and looping lines are the result of an involved process.

They're derived from a collection of his father's scrawled signatures, retrieved from postcards and letters. After overlaying and partially obscuring the signatures, Sontheimer took 26 unrecognizable fragments of the handwriting and created his own personal alphabet. Using a light box and photocopied enlargements of his "letters," he overlays them to compose his drawings. In M&A (2000), the "M" symbol and the "A" symbol are overlaid, forming the first two letters of the artist's first name. It is a kind of monogram, constructed from marks made by his father. The piece creates a closed circuit between father and son, with subtle allusions to the complex relationships that exist between them.

The enlarged letters have that fuzzy-edge quality caused by repeat photocopying. After enlarging, Sontheimer traces the outline of the blown-up fragment with a tender, wavering line quality, the artist's painstaking record of the original. It's obsessive, but in a thoughtful and sentimental way. Signatures are the trademark of an individual, and graphologists study them to discern character traits. There is a psychologically interesting element in dissecting, analyzing, enlarging and faithfully reproducing a mark someone has made. Does it still contain or represent something of the person when it has been so transformed? If not, at what point does it stop representing them?

Two small pieces of paper used as palettes are included in the show, the tidiest palettes I've ever seen. You can see where Sontheimer has meticulously taped them to a table with drafting dots, as evidenced by the naked semicircles on the edges. The palettes are filled with tiny marks made by the artist cleaning his pen, as well as the occasional word or phrase microscopically jotted down in stream-of-consciousness style. While the marks and comments are mildly interesting, the palettes function primarily as a record of the artist's process. I don't know that they are necessary to the exhibition.