



Tom Hughes, an installation artist who creates rudimentary word sculptures, poses with his work in 2008. His current installation is part of Beyond/In Western New York in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Robert Kirkham / Buffalo News

Interview/A conversation with Tom Hughes

Words morph into art in work of Tom Hughes

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For Tom Hughes, language isn't just a way to get a point across. It's something that lives and breathes, that can be as complex –as beautiful, as duplicitous or as frightening –as the human beings who use it. His work, familiar to Buffalo audiences who have seen Hughes' recent solo exhibitions in Buffalo Arts Studio and the Grant Street Gallery, consists of sculptural, word-based installations that make approachable commentaries on the way we use and perceive words.

Sometimes wistful, sometimes humorous and nearly always poetic, Hughes' living word-works seem directly tapped in to a sort of post-hipster zeitgeist, a humor that's evocative of headlines from The Onion and a tone that can be simultaneously arch and genuine, like that of the novelist Dave Eggers. His sculptures, featuring words illuminated by crudely crafted light boxes, are often human in size and scale, which points up his desire to treat language with a respect and consideration that –at least judging by the rise of Twitter and instant messaging –seems to be endangered.

His installation, "We Steel Ourselves Against Furious Amateurs," will be on view in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery through Jan. 16, 2011.

Give us a little overview of your installation.

The project that I'm working on at the Albright-Knox is an installation of text-based light boxes. What I've been trying to do with my work for the last little while is to incorporate language in a very physical sense.

What I've been thinking of is walking into a room where something took place, where something was said, where something important happened. And the words are basically left hanging in the air, as if they had been said and couldn't be taken back, right or wrong. They sit there and we have to live with them.

After it's been said, we can go back and parse it apart and pick little pieces out of it and try to discern exactly what was meant. When the language starts to break down a little bit, becomes kind of human, has its faults, has its shortcomings, that's when it gets to be really interesting for me...

If we stop and think about how complicated using words is, how complicated speaking is, or writing or communicating, it tends to fall apart a little bit. Conveying meaning is a really tricky thing to do. And that tricky part, that strangeness, is what I try to build up.

How much of your work do you want people to project their own thoughts onto?

It's impossible not to. I think of my work kind of as scenes from a play or from a movie that you kind of walk in the middle of. And there are some characters there that have some personality to them that you kind of have to pick [it] out from this little snippet. A lot of times, I'll use language like a direct address: "I think this," "We say this," "You do this." Those are meant to play a game with the viewer and determine whether or not "we" is a group you walked into, and you're confronting them or they're confronting you, or whether or not "we" is inclusive, whether you as the viewer are part of that "we."

They're sometimes on tripods?

They might have legs of their own, so they might have a little bit of that sort of anthropomorphic figure to them. They address people in terms of their scale, so they're sort of human-size.

The ones that I'm doing at the Albright- Knox are some of the largest ones that I've been able to do yet. Some of them are about the size of me, about six feet long. So you walk into these shapes that are the size of a person, because the word's that big, they become bigger and they sort of loom over you a little bit. So you get immersed in this environment –sort of like swirling around inside someone's head.

Can you reflect a little bit on what it means for you to be included in Beyond/In?

Beyond/In is absolutely amazing and it's fantastic to be a part of it. In particular at the Albright-Knox, which does mean quite a bit. That's been the spot that I grew up

going to look at art and that feels like a big accomplishment. I'm really proud of that.

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