

Conversing and Reversing

By Randy Garber

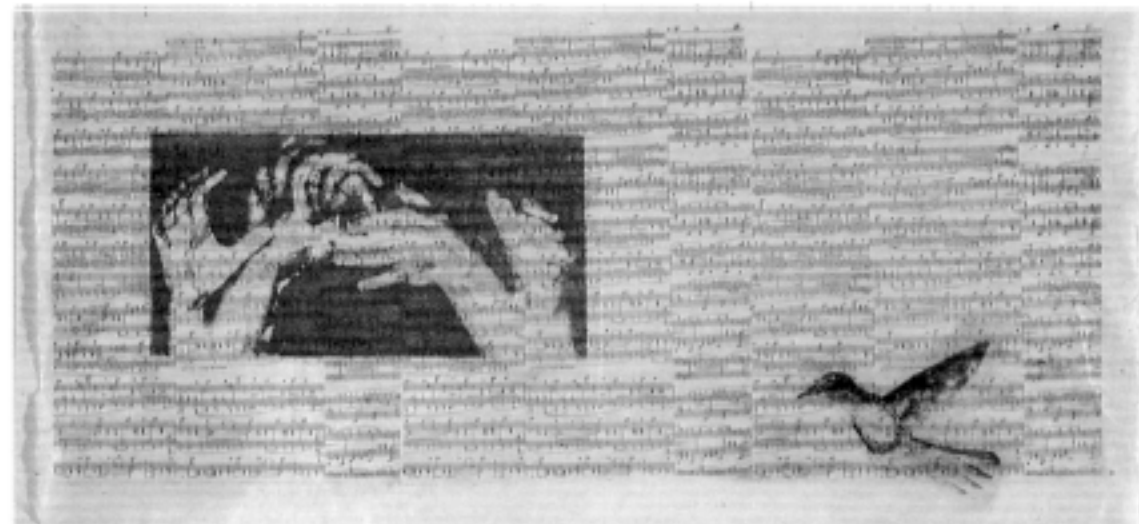
"It is all too easy to take language, one's own language, for granted — one may need to encounter another language, or rather another mode of language, in order to be astonished, pushed into wonder, again."

Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey Into the World of the Deaf* (Harper Collins, 1990).

The now ubiquitous discussions about the digital revolution (or, as John Labadie aptly names it in the Spring 2002 *Contemporary Impressions*, the digital "evolution") have nudged me to reaffirm my diehard allegiance to traditional printmaking processes. Let me make clear, however, that my reticence to move fully into the digital age is neither an ideological nor techno-phobic position. Rather, I've realized that printmaking is not just a medium I use to express ideas, but is the very way I *discover* them. Printmaking is a medium that takes me from the *inception* of an idea to its *conception* within a broader visual and semiotic context, through to its *execution* as a two dimensional object.

The subject of my work is the continually shifting nature of meaning (focusing on aural/oral communication) as it bounces back and forth from giver to receiver and is filtered through subjectivity. We try to grasp and "fix" on meaning when recognizable words and sounds come onto our radar screens, yet meaning is always in flux — subject to time, mood, location, cultural norms and expectations, etc. These, too, are the variables we traditional printmakers encounter repeatedly in making our objects.

My perceptions are filtered through my experience of existing in an "in-between" space. I neither hear normally (with oral speech as the mode of communication), nor am I deaf (with sign language as an entirely visual means to converse). Always unsure if my "de-coding" is what was intended, I have a heightened and persistent awareness of the vagaries of communication.



The "illusion of precision" in our aural/oral communication has equivalencies in hand-pulled printmaking which do not similarly exist in digital printmaking. Like lines of poetry unfurling, each step in the process reminds us that exactitude can only be approximated. We printmakers frequently talk of the richness of layering images to convey complex information and feeling states; but paradoxically, as we add to these layers of information, we ultimately have to succumb to the erosion of precision intrinsic to making these images. All too often, the requisite reversing of images leads to unexpected surprises. These and other unplanned occurrences are fertile and important. They stimulate a fresh mindset and keep the

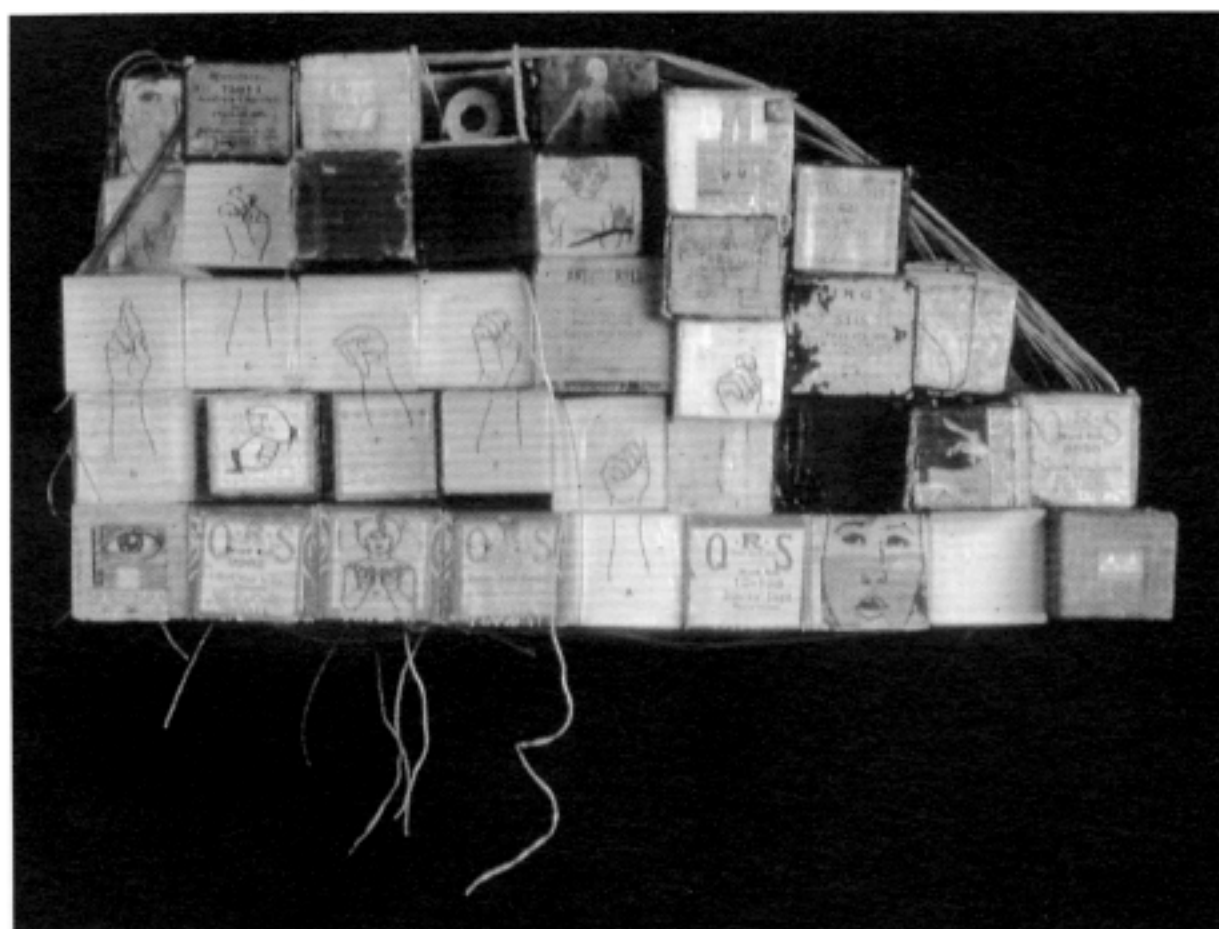
With bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature (and an MLA in landscape architecture), Randy Garber taught writing in the Graduate School of Business at Northeastern University and had her own communications consulting company. She returned to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and received a diploma in studio arts in 1998. She has published reviews and articles about art and has been exhibiting her work since 1996.

I suggest this liminal state in my work by creating ambiguous abstract forms, open-ended narratives and unsettling spaces and figures that hover between the volumetric and flat. Thus the imagery expresses not only my particular experience of navigating through auditory distortion, but also reveals the elusive nature of communication.

Randy Garber, *Sleight of Hand*, 2002. Color monograph on Japanese paper, 18 x 26".

outcome from being an over-determined execution of an initial, set plan. In short, they enable a natural morphology to be part of the final, static object, just as conversation will frequently urge ideas to greater complexity and subtlety.

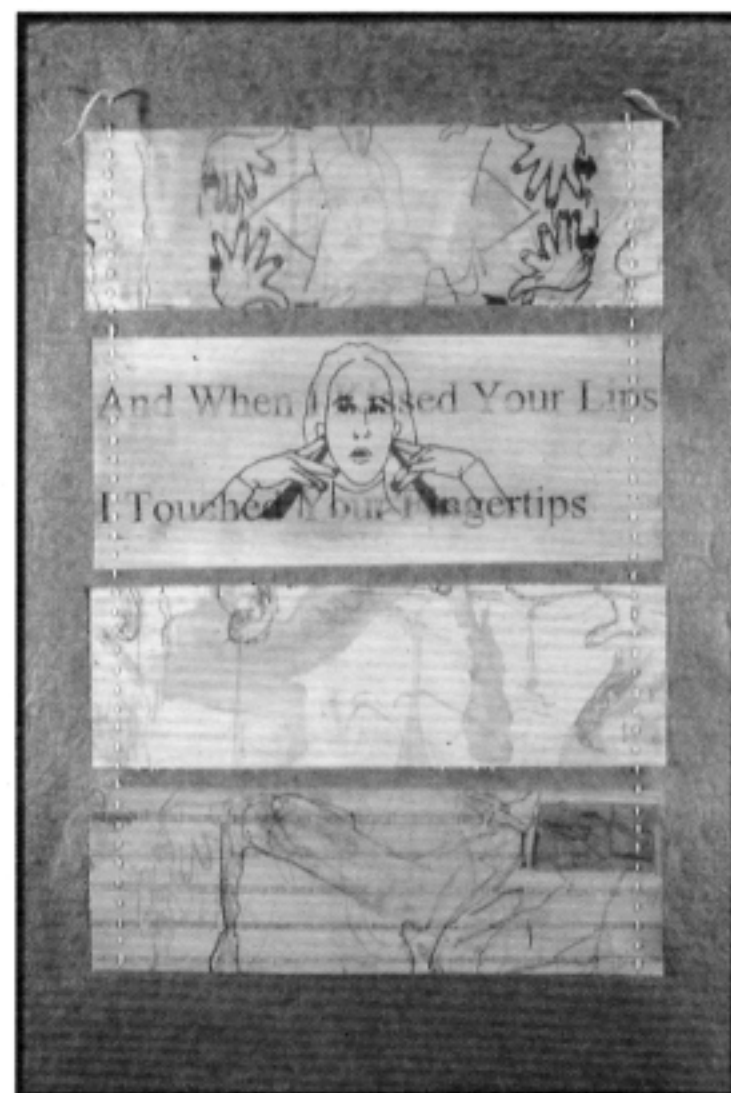
Making hand-pulled prints, we are always *actively* and *physically* interacting with the creation of the image. Those of us who rent space in print shops (my piece of heaven is the Mixit Print Studio in Somerville, Massachusetts) know well that we work in the midst of dialogue, either with other artists, our own processes or, most likely, the traces of work that preceded ours. Because of the nature of executing so many intricate steps and the unpredictability of the equipment on any given day (indeed, the press is one machine that seems to possess a soul, or at least a sometimes-cantankerous personality), we subject ourselves to the will of our plates, paper and press. The physicality in making hand-pulled prints is perhaps the single most dramatic difference from digital printmaking. And it is this physicality that is so crucial to achieving an authentic conception and execution in my own work.



Cutting, gouging and maiming my plates with acid or by hand embeds the idea of sensory nerve cells destroyed by high fevers. Bathing and blanket-drying paper is analogous to muffled, underwater sounds. Repeatedly running work through the press parallels my reliance on repetition of speech to discern meaning from oral language. Also, and importantly, the printmaking process echoes the fact that making sound (through voice or instrumentation) is essentially a physical, bodily act.

Thus, I enact my subject matter in the *making* of the prints. I further express it with my imagery and compositions. My visual vocabulary is primarily comprised of signifiers of different disciplines, images and symbols of the body, and invented marks and glyphs. I combine and recombine these signs, symbols and marks just as oral language and music rely on and replay a known vocabulary, syntax and rhythm to build sentences and lines.

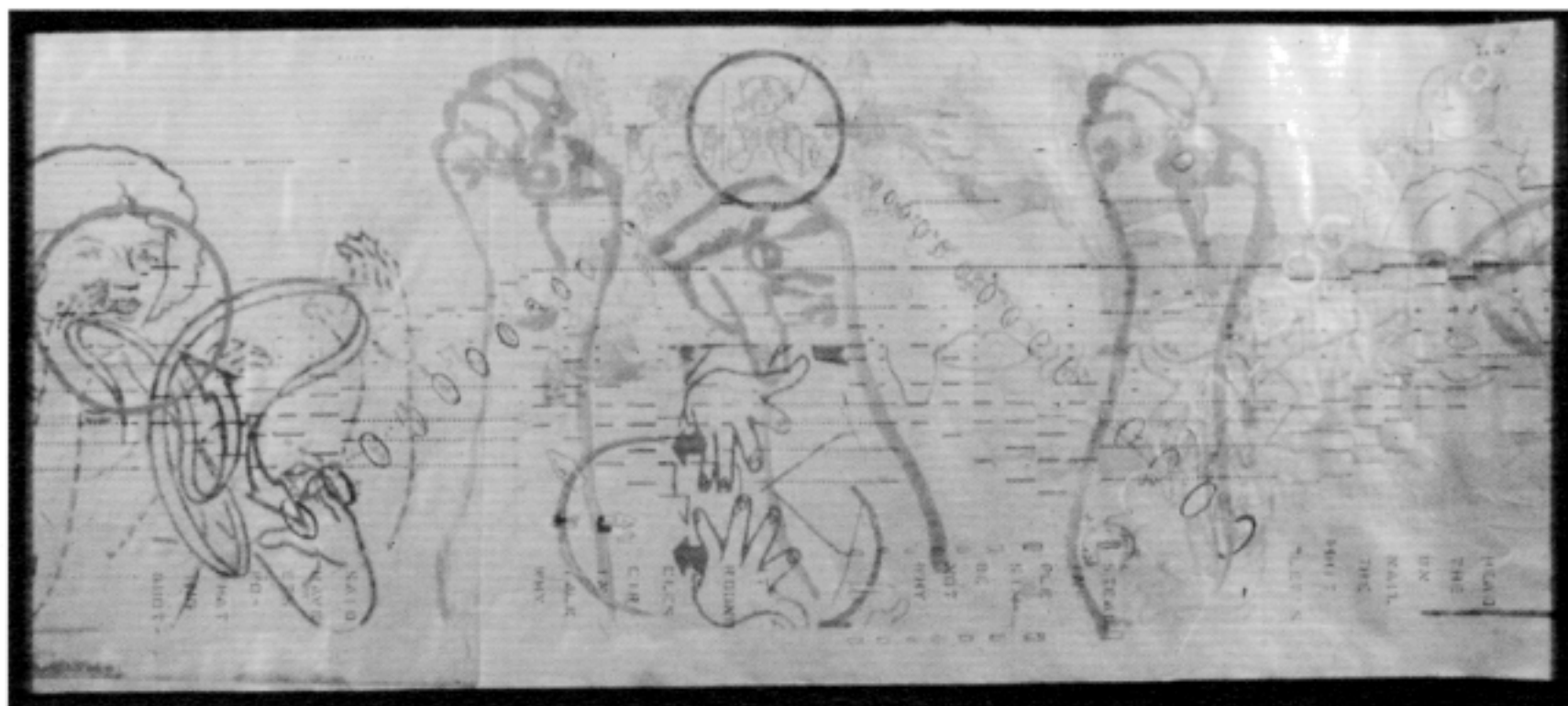
After a long day in the print shop, I can reflect upon my body's reflexive responses to making each stage and all the unplanned, sometimes marvelous, mistakes. Each step helps to push my dialogue with my subject beyond my self. And, of course, I have the vestiges of the work — embedded under my fingernails — to keep the process alive for at least several more days.



Randy Garber, **Word Rolls**, 2002. Color monoprint and digital print, watercolor, thread, player piano rolls, boxes, 18 x 22 x (depth) 18".

Randy Garder, **When I Kissed Your Lips**, 2001. Color monoprint with thread on paper, 31 x 24".

I borrow written codes and language from the fields of topography, medicine, music and cartography to suggest that all systems, despite the appearance and promise of objectivity, are subject to misinterpretation.



Randy Garber, **Libretto I**, 2001.
Color intaglio, watercolor, colored pencil and ink pen on player piano scrolls, detail, 11 x 180".

Opposite page:

Randy Garber, **Unfurled**, 2002.
Color monoprint, thread and collaged digital print on player piano scrolls, 14 x 24".

The print **Silence Takes Its Measure** is illustrated in **Contemporary Impressions**, Spring 2000.

Images that relate to the body imply, quite literally, their own language (e.g. gesture, sign and culturally-coded postures) and metaphorically, the actual and imagined worlds in which they exist. Each appropriated image has its own context and referents. I select particular images for their conceptual inferences as well as for the emotional responses they may evoke. For instance, neurological maps of the female body appear in many of my works to suggest the presumed "reality" and accuracy of scientific inquiry. But these symbols, as well as my use of graphic depictions from American Sign Language (ASL) and English finger spelling, also challenge viewers to empathize with the vulnerability and strength exposed by the extreme, raw and stripped-down nakedness of these images.

I fold these images into my own system of invented marks and glyphs that have the calligraphic rhythms of Arabic or Farsi (written languages that read from right to left). Frequently, I dramatically shift scale to entice viewers into a close, intimate space to examine nuance and detail (I work under a magnifying lens to make microscopically small marks – analogous to the amplification of hearing aids), then stand back to take in larger movements similar to those between people engaged in conversation.

Though the pictographs, like the medical illustrations and images from other information systems, have definite meanings and by their very graphic nature imply *specificity*, viewers will only be able to *approximate* or invent their own meaning. Sign language, for example, is essentially a three-dimensional language in which grammar is nested in complex spatial patterns. Consequently, two-dimensional depictions can represent only the slimmest and, ultimately, partial meaning. Thus, while I seduce viewers into thinking that precise meanings can be decoded, I deliberately undermine this with my compositions, color and conflated images that keep the meaning fluid, open and ambiguous. Paradoxically, my visually noisy prints express indistinguishable silences. I allure viewers into my world not to deceive, but to have them raise questions about the very nature of how we *decipher* meaning.

Such questions of deciphering, translating, and re-presenting are our mainstay as artists. Inevitably, we will continue to expand possibilities for posing and solving our visual queries. New, digital printing technologies offer all manner of virtual realities, seemingly infinite availability of material and, importantly, exciting potential to democratize access to our art. But the vital, labor-rich ingredient of kinesthetic knowledge remains unique to traditional hand-pulled printmaking methods. ✱

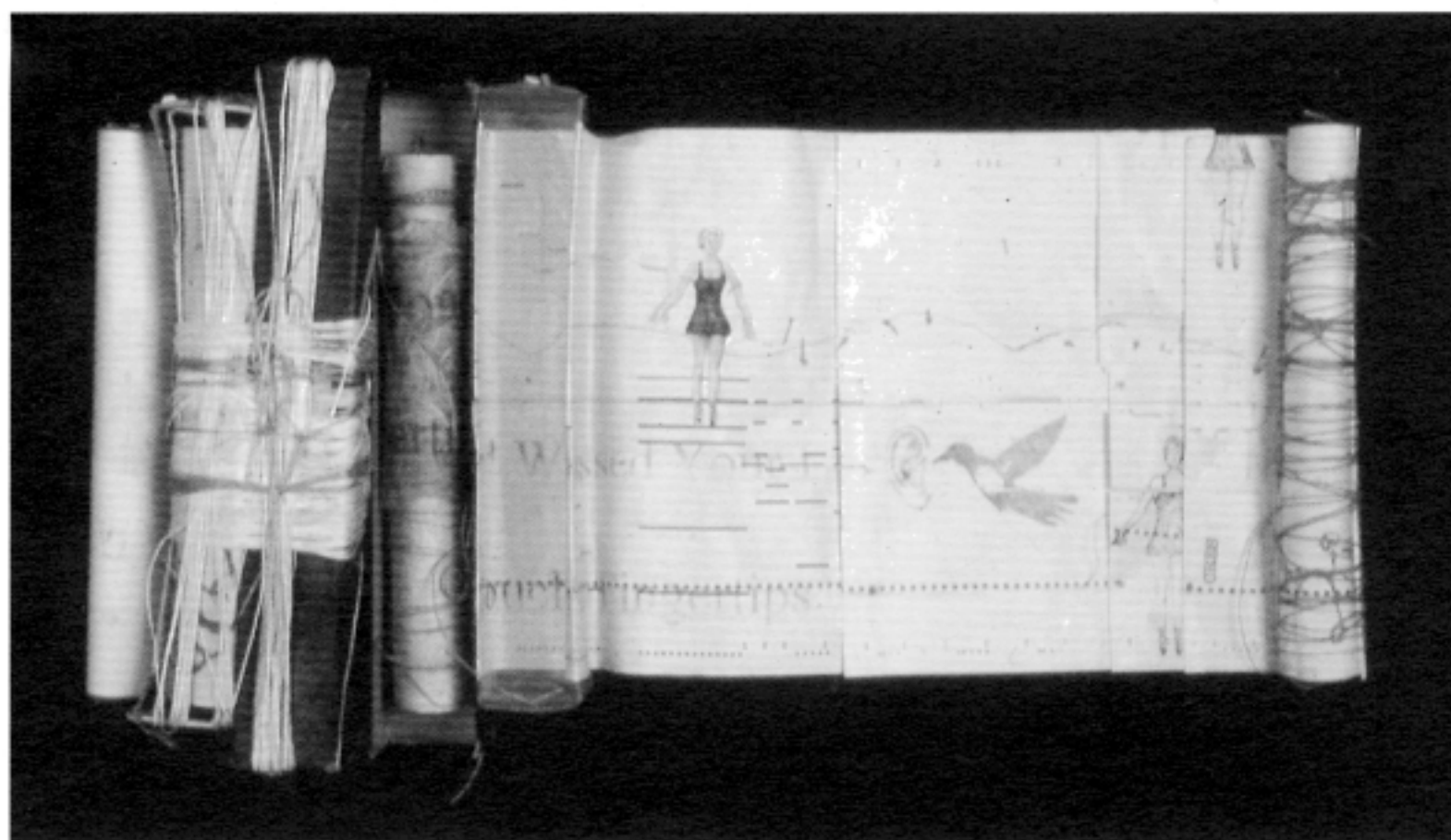
Measures of Silence, a solo exhibition/installation about the psychological and biological aspects of hearing and deciphering language, will be exhibited this Spring in Rochester, New York. Comprised of prints, paintings and some sculpture, the medium is mostly paper. The paintings, in the style of traditional Indian miniatures on handmade *wasli* paper, act as “frontispieces.” The blueprints for the installation are the “libretto drawings” on original player piano scrolls, wherein musical notation is indicated by the absence of the paper – punched out notes – a wonderful template for me to visually express ideas about hearing loss. Since my subject matter concerns the absence and distortions of sound, I alter these scrolls to distort the printed lyrics and musical indications and, consequently, raise questions about how we apprehend, decode and interpret sound and language.

The installation of the scrolls will itself convey various meanings of “measure.” Some scrolls will be rolled out their entire length (approximately six feet) and hung horizontally suggesting both the measurement of time and space. Stacked, they suggest the five lines of a musical staff, traditionally divided into “measures.” Scrolls placed partially open on a bema, the traditional lectern in a synagogue, recall the way a torah scroll is unfurled to be read and interpreted. Still others, rolled up entirely, imply language and music that are present, but unheard.

The sculptures include works made from piano roll boxes bound with waxed and binder’s thread, cast boxes that take the shape of q-tips, and clear boxes that contain shreds of verbal information. The combination of found materials with print techniques, very traditional methods (and style in the miniatures) and three-dimensional materials, produces a kind of visual eulogy to lost sounds. Since I use sign language and invented calligraphic marks as main elements of my visual “grammar,” touch is a very important aspect of the work: all of it is created by hand – I admit, somewhat “retro” in our era of digital production.

Measures of Silence, March 24 through May 2, 2003, at the Dyer Art Center, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, on the campus of the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York. For more information, write to Randy.Garber@attbi.com.

As in a musical composition (I’m inspired by the work of Phillip Glass), I introduce and repeat central elements and symbols and then weave them in different rhythms throughout the prints, paintings and scrolls. I repeat and alter patterns; indeed, all of the work is characterized by obsessive, detailed mark-making, which, for me, parallels the kind of acute attention to detail and nuance necessary to decipher language from sound.



I combine a range of intaglio techniques (including soft ground, hard ground and spit bite etching and drypoint) as well as relief printing with stencils and woodblocks. I run the plates through the press repeatedly, to produce layers of overlapping and intersecting kinds of language.