

CC Elian:

THE CALLIGRAPHER'S NON-CALLIGRAPHER

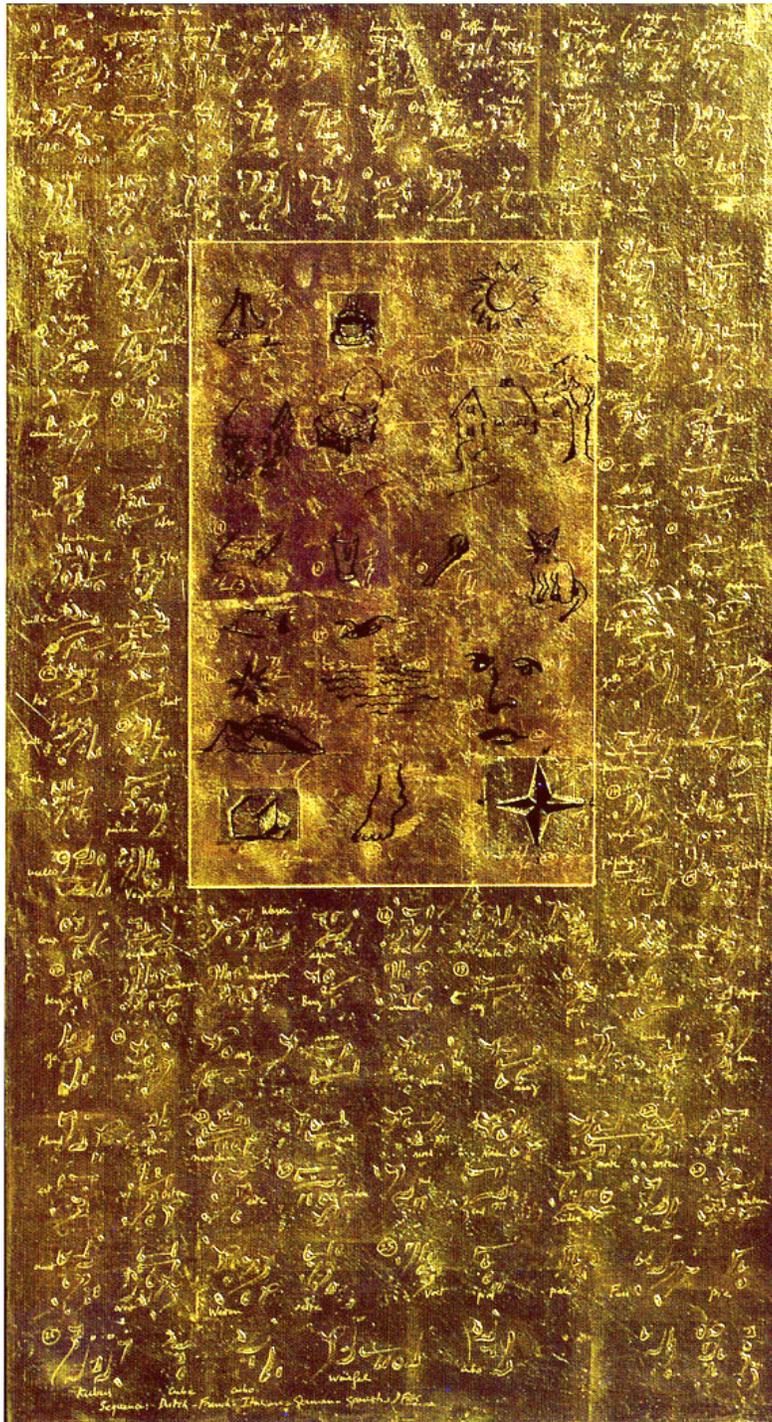


BY ROSE FOLSOM

HER ART HAS APPEARED IN SEVERAL *Letter Arts Review* Annuals since the mid-90s. I've always found the work haunting – just out of reach. It invites you in, but you have to search around a bit for it to quietly speak to you. CC Elian (or Claudine, as she invites you to call her) moved from Seattle back to New York during the run of her summer 2002 exhibition, and so I was able to go to Meru Art in Brooklyn to see the work and meet the artist in person. Her work in “conceptual calligraphy” has earned her a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and awards from other institutions.

Claudine is very much like her art: refined, gentle and enigmatic. She is a conceptual artist for whom questions of being and perception are the primary focus of her work. She considers the visual art a byproduct of the thought process and existential experience. When I ask her how the conceptual aspect of her art meshes with the physical aspect, she answers, “I see the physical artwork as a byproduct of an exploration into the elements of consciousness, and how those elements are the building blocks of an experience of reality and applied self-identity; which identity implies a greater or lesser degree of control over the creation of the reality that’s being experienced.”

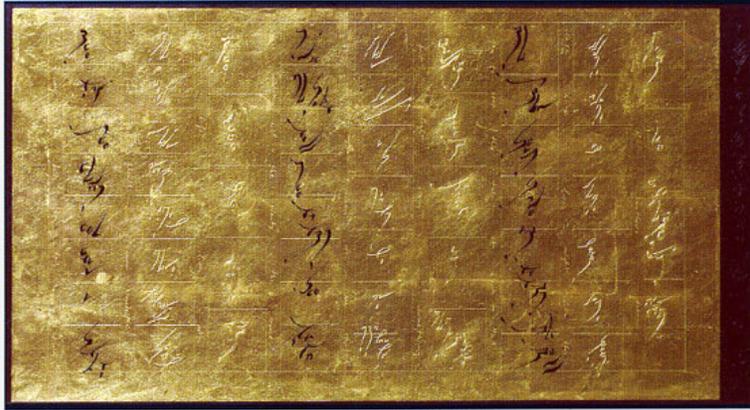
Stay with me on this. Although her answer is a little bewildering at first, there is something about her and her work that I trust, and I want to know more. I ask where she grew up. She says that she and her twin brother, born in France, became foster chil-



Opposite, top
I'm in Heaven I Know
 Ink on paper
 20 x 16 (51 x 40.6)
 1997

Opposite, bottom
**Every Old Man
 Was A Young Man**
 23K gold leaf on
 found photo
 9.25 x 7.25 (23 x 18)
 1992

At left
Becoming Sexlingual
 23K gold leaf, India ink
 32 x 20 (81.28 x 50.8)
 2002



dren at birth and were adopted at six, whereupon they were taken to New York City to live. In other words, she and her brother experienced two continents and three languages (Alsatian, French and English) by the time they were six. Her interest in the clarity or obscurity of verbal communication in how self-identity is formed and in what control one has over reality starts to make sense. For Claudine these are not parlor-game questions, but the story of her life.

"I think of myself first as a conceptual artist, then as a writer, then as a visual artist," she explains. "That's why I call my writing system conceptual calligraphy – because the being is the conceptual art and the writing is the medium of expression."

As a young adult, Claudine came up with the writing system she still uses in her art (see page 18 for an explanation of the code). It is a codification of the Latin alphabet, and is her own system of characters. She never studied calligraphy, but says there is a calligraphic element to the system itself, and she welcomes calligraphers to try it. She notes that everyone who tries it comes up with a different result. "Other people have come up with forms that never occurred to me," she says. "My brother made the circle strokes like loops with trails." She thinks of the system as 'line jazz.' "You just go with the flow of it."

Claudine began her artistic life when a teenager, making paintings and, later, photographs. In the early '90s, after having discarded her photography equipment, she began using found antique photographs, because she "couldn't resist." On the mat surrounding the photos she would write, using her conceptual calligraphy and also her normal handwriting. She continues to use both kinds of writing in her most recent work. In the late '90s she became dissatisfied with the "two-level" separation between the photo and the mat, and wanted to work on one seamless surface. "I just said to myself, 'That's it – you can't do that

anymore,'" she says.

The decision to abandon the mats as a writing surface caused her to look for other ways of working. Three years ago she was doing pieces in graphite and gold, which incorporated photographs, and was using a black border to define the edge of the work. A commercial artist friend remarked that the black inked border wasn't perfectly straight. Claudine began to see the inked border as a "visual hangnail" and decided to bring the surface color to the edge of the piece, and leave out the border. It was at this time that she realized she didn't need to include photographic images at all. She had previously thought she needed an image in order to be doing visual art. But when she arrived at a "simplicity of surface" (one color with no border), she also realized she didn't need to include images. She came to see that "a word is enough. Just as a picture can evoke a thousand words, so a word can evoke a thousand images."

She describes the turning point in her work: "The simplicity of this one field compels me to become simpler in myself, because then the mark is very seismographic. When I was left with this much quieter field of activity – just one thing – I realized not only that I didn't need photographic images, but that I didn't have to prove to anyone that I could draw. I realized I don't have to do sentences either, because a sentence is a form of an image ... If I make a coherent sentence, I give you a picture, right?"

Instead of word pictures, Claudine prefers the "melodic" play of fragmenting words and playing with their components. "If I say, 'You are wearing a dress with red poppy flowers,' I've said something. If I just say, 'flower,' and look at the word 'flow' in the word 'flower' or 'low' in the word 'flow' there is this whole wealth of compositional elements and conceptual dynamics, just looking at words and juxtaposing them." She continues, "Words

Opposite, clockwise from upper left

Four Poems

23K gold leaf, India ink, graphite
32 x 20 (81.28 x 50.8)
2002

I Once Took a Road

Graphite, 22k gold leaf
32 x 20 (81 x 51)
2001

I've Been Here Before

Graphite, 23k gold leaf
32 x 20 (81 x 51)
2002

Visiting Nurse (detail)

23 gold leaf, India ink
22 x 9.5 (56 x 24)
1992

Balance Is The Only Law

Gold leaf, aluminum, found photo
11.75 x 8.5 (30 x 21.5)
1992

Properties of Gold
23K gold leaf
32 x 20 (81.28 x 50.8)
2002



are really cookie cutters. Depending on the dough you're working with and how you cook it, you might be dealing with a completely different kind of eating. I'm working with all the different ways a word can be perceived."

For Claudine, placing two words together is like placing two colors together. She uses "language elements" and their aspects of color, form, representation, placement, texture and size as she would any other visual medium. What she particularly loves is the added conceptual element in using words instead of pictures. The most difficult challenge for her in all this is dealing with the boundary "between pure expressive line and line that represents sound and meaning."

"I like the letter A," she observes. "It has a sort of activity to it. I've looked at esoteric information about letters which isn't academically substantiated, but I feel it's essential to include everything that's been written about a letter in order to know it well. Thousands of years ago someone associated the letter A with activity because it is the initial letter of the word coming into being – that's part of its folkloric history. I refer to this kind of ancient information as 'legends of letters.' These legends give me a sense of the character of that letter."

Claudine's writing system gives her an independent point of view on every aspect of her text's meaning, without confining her to Latin or Chinese or some other system that has its own history. "I can explore the meaning of the text and the letters without having to use the very writing system I am trying to understand. Instead, it all comes together in 'neutral territory' that has no specific cultural ties. In this way, the meaning of what is written can be seen in a fresher way." She compares it to stepping back from a window to see the whole context, as compared with keeping one's nose pressed against the glass.

The conceptual part of the artwork takes place in her exploration of the "so-called meaning" of letters and words of various times, places and cultures. "I treat writing and words as a window into human consciousness," she says. "My existential project is to figure out where I am, how it works, and what I am going to do with it. I assume I already know, but I don't have the words yet." She says that the meaning of a word is not absolute. It is rather a kind of template whose specific content varies with each person.

I remind Claudine that most calligraphers are not used to asking these questions. For a traditionally trained Western calligrapher, marks make letters, and letters make words whose meaning is agreed to by everyone. "Decipherment is part of the process in my work," she explains. In other words, the mind is opened to new thoughts and associations by having to take the time to decipher her letters and words. It slows and changes the reading process, which invites the viewer/reader to bring more of his own associations and history to the work. She describes the reading process as the "popping out" of meaning. She likens it to a recent experience in which she thought she saw a red towel on a shelf. When she got closer, it was a roll of red tape. The meaning of the red object "popped out" on closer examination. It is this kind of discovery that she tries to build into her artwork with the help of her writing system which slows down the reading so that each word is a discovery.

In the piece "Becoming Sexlingual" (page 13), there are words in six languages (including the iconic language of pictures) which create a stew of associations. She started with a ground of gold leaf over acrylic medium, and wrote the words in Winsor & Newton black ink over the gold. She didn't like the way the ink looked, so she wiped it off. The ink left rough, granular traces, which she then gold-leafed. She

BASIC ELEMENTS OF CONCEPTUAL CALLIGRAPHY

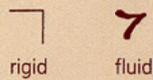
The structure of conceptual calligraphy consists of the placement of the 26 Latin letters in alphabetical order within a nine-square grid:

C, L U	F, O X	I, R
B, K T	E, N W	H, Q Z
A, J S	D, M V	G, P Y

Each section of the grid has a unique shape. For example, the lower left (A,J,S) has a "ceiling" and a "right wall." When we see this configuration, it can only represent A, J or S.

In each section, lines of equal length represent the first letter in the section. For example:

Lower left section = A



The same configuration, but with lines of unequal length represent the second letter in the section:

Lower left section = J

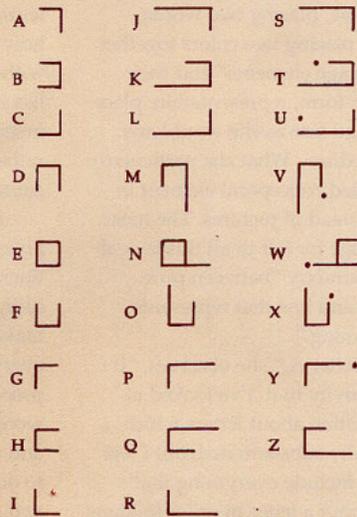


The same configuration, but with unequal lines accompanied by a dot or dash:

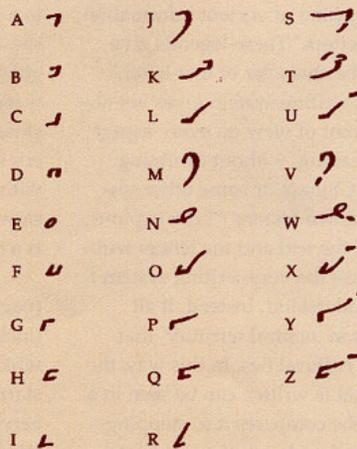
Lower left section = S



An illustration of the entire alphabet written in "rigid" form



The entire alphabet written in one of the many possible "fluid" forms



FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTUAL CALLIGRAPHY, SEE WWW.CCELIAN.COM

added more writing in gold (gilded acrylic medium). "I realized this is exactly what it feels like to learn a new language," she says. "I'm perfecting my Spanish now, and sometimes I'll hear it spoken and ask, 'Where's the word in that sound?' In this piece you have that vague echo of the sound underneath, and there's the clear one on top of it, and how do you pull the meaning from the background sounds? The material elements and the intended meaning all work together to give me the experience of what it's like to learn a language, from the early time into full coherence." In

mean one with a long or short tail, or one with fluffy or short fur. For Claudine, art comes in when we start making choices; when we start selecting the details. With a smile she says, "It's like the creator of all the possible arts presents you with this menu of materials ... and you start cooking."

I ask what has drawn her to the all-gold and all-graphite work. "One of the reasons

Four Poems
detail

I Once Took a Road
detail



all of her recent work she says she has "experienced the subject" and sees the subjects very differently, having gone through the process of creating the works.

The choosing of image icons for "Becoming Sexlingual" had its own challenges. It was impossible to find an icon for "water" that did not also connote "sea" or "splash" or "drink." She found that even the simplest words have multiple meanings, or rather, that the simplest meanings have multiple words. The word "dog" can

out, I'm just going to be too diffuse," she says. For Claudine, the surfaces of the monochrome pieces mirror our actual perception. When seen in a certain light, the incised writing is not visible. But when the light changes, the writing appears. She asks, "Have you ever noticed that in some states of mind, like when you are on vacation, you see everything and at other times you see very little of what is around you?"

Art history and the work of other artists have not been conscious influences



I limited myself to a narrow palette is that even if I do this for the rest of my life, I'll never exhaust the possibilities. If I branch

Ten Worst Listening Habits - I Told You So
India ink, copper, found photo, found text
20 x 16 (51 x 40)
1994

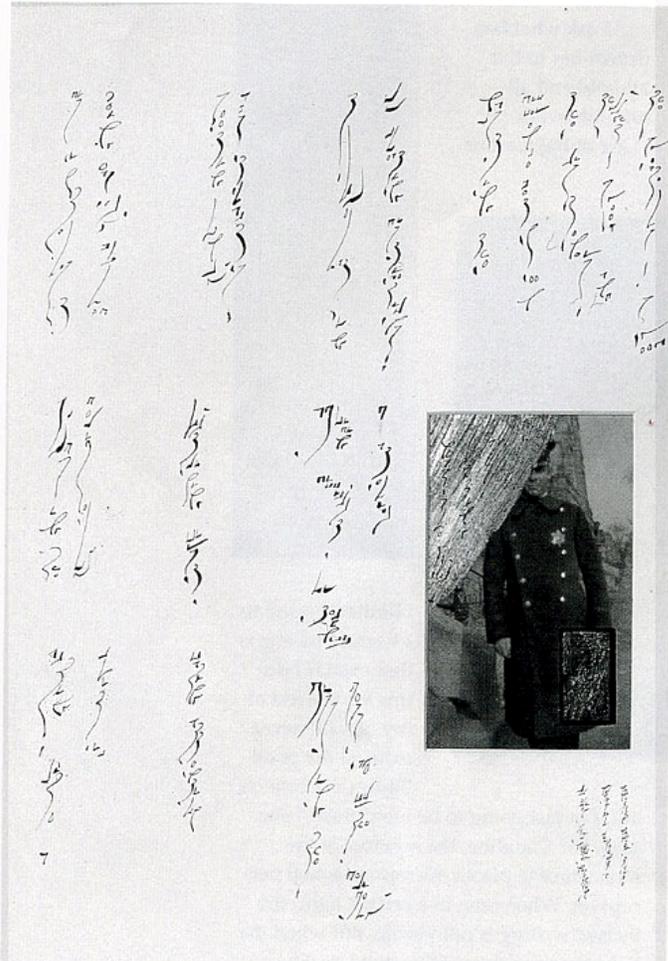
for her. "I figure that as a human being, as a variation on other human beings, I can tap into the universal as can anyone. If I'm really tapping into universal issues, then the average person should be able to relate to it because I'm dealing with the ABCs of being human. I have a lot of faith that if I am sin-

order to relate to it. The funny part is, people come into this gallery and they're all experts on the subject matter because they use language all the time!"

I ask Claudine, "Why writing?" After all, she is not a calligrapher. Her artistic training is in drawing, painting and photography. What is it about writing that pulled her away from the other arts? "Language is an artform that is its own subject," she answers. "If I draw an apple or photograph it, that apple is fully itself whether I draw it or not. [Written] language is a human product that comes to life only when it's read. It is fully itself only in a human context. That also makes the reader an essential co-creator of the artwork."

One of her greatest interests is noticing patterns and comparing similarities. "When I was a kid, I saw a skunk run over on the road," she says, "with heart, liver and guts, and I thought, 'Wait a minute - that looks awfully familiar!'" She laughs. "There's this echo - there are infinite variations on a theme. The periodic table is limited to a few elements; also the alphabet and the numbers. And the atoms: proton, neutron, electron. So in the atom, you've got three things in different proportions, with different degrees of bonding, making up all of this." She motions to indicate the whole world. "There's got to be a simple explanation, or a simple theme to humanity. What makes sense to me as a theme is creativity. That means there is an infinity of unique things ... so the answer is simple, but the practice is infinite." She finds this notion to be a relief. "It means I don't have to do anything more than whatever I can do because somebody else is doing their share of infinity. You're doing your share, and if you don't do it, I'm not going to see it. I'm pretty sure that if I don't do this, nobody else can. If I don't do this, who's going to do it?"

This realization gives her permission to



care in this goal and rigorous in my method of examining my premises - that is, whittling down to necessary thoughts, keeping it simple - then a viewer wouldn't have to be educated about the subject matter in

call herself an artist. "It took me a long time to say that – maybe just in the last few years." She smiles. "Being an artist is really freeing. It's the best life I can imagine. It wasn't that somebody else was going to give it to me and I was going to be appropriately grateful; it was that I was going to give it to me, and be comfortable that I wasn't asking for too much.

"I keep asking, 'What are my apples?' because an apple tree gives apples a lot better than it gives pears. These are my apples. I'm clear on that. But it took years to deprogram myself from thinking I had to have a function that fed somebody directly." For Claudine, feeding someone indirectly means putting the right elements of thought, calmness and care into a piece so

that it will have an effect for generations – something that will have positive reverberations for a long time. "Otherwise, why bother?" she asks.

Claudine takes words literally. She breaks the word "secure" into its component parts, se (self) and cure (care). For her, self-empowerment, or accessing the source of creativity within oneself, is the best way to feel secure, rather than shifting the authority or responsibility elsewhere. "I wanted [a way of living] that, literally, makes sense, as in the neurological experience of direct contact with reality ... I didn't want any nonsense because I'm betting my life on it." **LAR**

**Walk with me
in the night**
Graphite, incised marks
32 x 20 (81 x 51)
2001

