

photograph

Catherine Wagner: trans/literate

Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

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by Glen Helfand

The standardized diptychs that comprise Catherine Wagner's exhibition at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery through March 2 generate a compelling confrontation with shifting modes of communication. Each elegant studio composition depicting a single book — closed in the photograph on the left and open on the right — has a cool, typological remove that is undercut by the subjects themselves, their familiarity and tactility. These are Western classics— the Holy Bible, *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, etc. — bound in colored cloth. Some are faded and frayed (see *Moby Dick; or, The Whale, Herman Melville*, 2011), others clean and bright, like *A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens*, 2011, in potent vermillion. But they're all Braille editions, exotic and increasingly rare objects.

On a formal level, the pictures are still lifes of color and form. The book pages are thick with texture, the paper signatures, seen most clearly in the left-hand images, appear full and rounded. Braille's physicality commands more space than traditional print and the full text of a modest novel often takes multiple volumes in Braille. Words become dimensional. They are not seen but touched by the blind, and yet Braille has an emphatic visual presence in the graphic arrangements of raised dots, and that texture is seductive. We want to touch these photographs, a desire that Wagner astutely stokes by rendering each title in dimensional Braille dots in the lower right corner. That we cannot actually touch these prints, which are framed under glass, is a visceral challenge to the access of knowledge, and a key ingredient of the work's success. This detail resonates with the current shifts in publishing, from analog to digital, from weighty tomes to virtual libraries accessed on thin electronic tablets with smooth, touch-activated interfaces. Blind readers, it is reported, currently opt for more inexpensively produced books on tape than Braille editions, the latter fast becoming a literary equivalent of an eight-track tape.

While the images maintain a formal distance, Wagner recognizes that books are things we hold intimately close, words and ideas moving into our minds. Yet books are not without aesthetic identities that channel meaning and personality, and these ingredients imbue the series with a warmth and complexity that intensifies the closer you come to the photographs.