



“21st Century Runes” - Casper Brindle’s *Recent Work* Show at Nancy Toomey Fine Art

Review by Richard Speer, February 2021

How artworks that are such rollicking good fun on the surface can flow within with an underground river’s profound inscrutability is perhaps the central paradox and pleasure of Casper Brindle’s *Recent Work*. The Carnaby Street colors catch you first: opaque, yummy, saturated squares and rectangles resplending like overgrown Jolly Ranchers on the lam from the candy store. They’re a little bit sci-fi, a little bit Light and Space, they’ve got the Eric Orr pedigree, the whole Venice Beach airbrush finish-fetish surfing-sunset mojo, yet just as surely, beneath all the curb appeal, they whisper of semiotics. Their sound and fury signifies something—what, we cannot be sure; but at their centers a vertical bar shimmers within its pigmented-acrylic encasement, transforming what might merely have been a perfectly beautiful glowing box into something more akin to a runestone.

NANCY TOOMEY *Fine Art*



The six works in this series, entitled *Glyphs* and installed with ruthless panache in Nancy Toomey's space at Minnesota Street Project, communicate across the chasm of written language in the manner of runes, petroglyphs, and pictographs and ideofoms up and down the semiotic family tree. What are we to make of those enigmatic central bars that lend the compositions their iconicism? Do our contemporary eyes see a "1" in the digital domain of 1s and 0s; do our spiritual selves infer an upraised index finger in some private mudra; do our limbic systems detect stand-ins for trees, towers, figures, or beast striding across the open savannah? Like exclamation points communicating no content save their own emphaticness, the pieces do not give up their secrets; we must infer.

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Monoliths, improbably, have figured in our headlines in late 2020 and early 2021, as fake John McCrackens have turned up, Zelig-like, in the Utah desert and other unlikely locales. McCracken's sculptures have long been associated with the monoliths in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*: inky-black rectangles that loom portentously, imparting unspeakable knowledge to prehistoric homonids and early-21st century astronauts. In their sphinx-like silence, these imposing slabs betray evidence of intelligent design. They have been embedded in the earth and moon with the imperative toward communication. Casper Brindle's *Glyphs* seem similarly charged. As symbols and ciphers, they communicate with the individual viewer, to whom they transmit on a private frequency. "Secular sacredness... religious but not religious" is how the artist describes that sui generis connection between object and viewer, and I concur. Get this elemental within the dynamic between symbol and referent, and you arrive at a visual syntax in which, as in East Asian pictographic scripts, mark and meaning intermingle.

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In the painting *Hieroglyph 0001*, Brindle builds a house for his rune, a shrine in mirror-image symmetry like the Taj Mahal doubled upon itself within the Mughal Gardens reflecting pool. The image is dialectic, its top half suggesting the aubade of dawn, the bottom a nocturne of jasmine-scented evening, with that singular, implacable cipher rendered in silver leaf. The metal's gleam—together with the exposed warp and woof of linen canvas, in contrast to *Glyph's* plasticine hermeticism—lends this ambitious painting an Old World lustre, an aura of Byzantine candlelight agreeably at odds with *Glyph's* cool retro-futurism.

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This inspired, incongruous integration of ancient and contemporary polarities is perhaps inevitable, given this artist's backstory. His father, David Brindle, was an architect who designed laboratories and high-rises around the world, while his mother, Bridgette Brindle, was a fashion designer and illustrator who nurtured in her son an inclusivist, nothing-is-wrong approach to expression and experimentation. When the couple moved from the United Kingdom via Canada to Southern California in the early 1970s, they, like so many transplanted Brits, found themselves entranced by the region's extraordinary light and buoyant lifestyle—a fascination that found its way into Brindle's own sensibility, although not as simplistically as is often assumed. This artist is not reducible to semiotics on a surfboard; his approach to visual fascination is eclectic and egalitarian. In his primordial memory, a hubcap or Mexican tapestry elevated by his mother to the status of iconography staked every bit the aesthetic claim as did the HSBC Bank Building his father helped erect in Hong Kong. In that expansive Venn diagram's common terrain, his own aesthetic bloomed.

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His current works, with their impeccable rectilinearity, are anything but prescriptively mystical, yet even on a formalist plane, *Hieroglyph's* finely graded inverse atmospherics and *Glyph's* sfumato-like framing devices suggest nimbuses radiating from central axes, as if betokening saints and archangels or the storied music of the spheres. How, or whether, to reconcile the works' wordless invocations of deity with their unrepentant optical hedonism is a conundrum the artist cogently states, then promptly leaves the viewer to ponder, alone and agog in the thrall of these uncanny forms.

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Richard Speer is a critic and curator whose reviews and essays have appeared in *ARTnews*, *Art Papers*, *Artpulse*, *Salon*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. He is co-curator of the forthcoming exhibition *Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing* (LACMA, Spring 2023) and author of *The Space of Effusion: Sam Francis in Japan* (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020).