

Writing and Remembering in Bunny Burson's *Hidden in Plain Sight* Series

By Karen K. Butler

“It seems that the essential impulse in working at all is to rehaunt your own house, or to allow what haunts you to have a voice, to chart what is deeply private and etched on the soul and find form and structure for it.” - Colm Toibin¹

Fragments from this quote appear in *Untitled 32*, one of Bunny Burson's works from her *Hidden in Plain Sight* series. Though Toibin, an Irish writer and critic, is referring to the personal transformation that occurs in the act of novelistic writing, the sentiment is equally applicable to Burson's works, which engage deeply with a particular form of writing – in this case private correspondence – while also appearing as a form of writing in their own right. The works in this series all take up writing as their subject and in so doing become an exploration of the ambiguity and impermanence that is at the heart of communication itself as well as a singular attempt to commemorate and come to terms with loss.

Hidden in Plain Sight refers to a group of over 100 letters written by the artist's grandparents to her mother between 1939 and 1941, which the artist found in 2009 in her family home where they had been stored for over 50 years. The letters were written in German, a language that Burson does not read. When she had them translated, the letters opened a window onto the lives of her mother and grandparents, revealing the story of her grandparents last years during the war and precious details of their daily lives that she had never known. These letters, Burson explains, “evoke memories I could never have had...the names of distant cities my grandparents tried to reach, their guarded and unguarded thoughts, gestures of parental love and the second guessing of choices made.”² In 1938, Burson's grandparents, German Jews living in Leipzig, sent their two children, a boy and a girl (Burson's mother), to the United States in an effort to protect them from the increasing restrictions on Jewish life and activity in Germany. The letters, which were sent to Burson's mother in Memphis, TN, detail the efforts of Burson's grandparents to leave first Germany, and then Latvia, before their deaths in 1941.

Although a very personal journey resides at the heart of this project, the details of that story are not necessary to comprehend Burson's works. In fact, the message of a piece such as the diptych *Untitled 32* can be understood even if the phrases cannot be deciphered and their original content remains unknown. The left side of the work consists of a large rectangle of translucent white vellum, which has been printed on both sides with black and white fragments of German, English, and Chinese phrases in different handwritten and typewritten styles and sizes. The right side is made up of a piece of opaque black paper with similar fragments of sentences printed in white and red paint. Although some of the words can be discerned, what is most evident is the meticulous layering of text and its concomitant sense of tactility, which is the result of the artist repeatedly imprinting the delicate paper with semi-legible phrases. The diptych format suggests a book, while its large scale conjures references to religious altarpieces or devotional objects. Cumulatively, the piling up of words on the paper, both traces an act of devotion – Burson's towards the individuals who wrote the letters – and suggests the incomplete nature of any act of communication.

Most of the works in the series are untitled, and perhaps there are no words that can stand in for works that attempt to express such an experience of discovery and loss. In *Untitled 11*, Burson combines pages from a German newspaper published on November 10, 1938, the day after Kristallnacht, and a sheet of transparent vellum over which she has collaged the names of cities, one over the other, that appear in the letters: Budapest, Leipzig, London, Memphis, Moscow, Palestine, Rotterdam, and Washington. Burson made the stencils for the city names by first tracing the original words in the letters on a transparent sheet of paper, then projecting those tracings with an overhead projector onto a larger sheet of paper, tracing over them in turn, and then cutting those tracings into individual stencils. By physically tracing the very words that her grandparents wrote, Burson performs an act of commemoration and love, but also demonstrates the impossibility of ever fully grasping those events. More broadly, *Untitled 11*, with the newspaper as its background and its dense layering of city names, reads as a comment on the plight of the many individuals who were forced to flee their homes at the hands of the German military.

¹ Jeffrey Eugenides and Colm Toibin, “The Stuff That Won't Go Away,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2011.

² Bunny Burson, Artist's Statement, 2012.

Home and *Hidden in Plain Sight* are the only works in the series that are titled, and though they do refer to specific objects – a real home and the letters themselves – they remain open ended, inviting the viewer to mourn and celebrate along with the artist. *Home* consists of 230 cast resin doorplates arranged on the wall in the shape of one large doorplate. The name L. Cohen is visible on some of these transparent objects, though it is not evident who this person is (it is the doorplate from Burson's father's former home in Berlin – he too was a German Jew who fled during the war). The ghostly nature of the resin plates, repeated in groups across the wall, combined with the Jewish name on some of them, suggests at the very least dislocation and transience. *Hidden in Plain Sight* consists of 100 brass and aluminum envelopes, engraved from life-size copies of the actual envelopes, and tied in bundles. The work gives presence to the letters that Burson found, but does not disclose their contents.

Burson is a printmaker by training and the majority of works in the show are works on paper, though few of them are conventional prints. Most of them, such as the group of works that make up *Untitled 20* through *Untitled 31*, include some form of collage (often elements of chine collé), stencil, or simple transfer. Others, such as *Untitled 4*, *Untitled 12*, and *Untitled 34*, are based on maps of cities, including Washington, D.C. and Leipzig, and incorporate collaged portions of letters and newspapers and, in one instance, *Untitled 12*, red map pins, marking the places that one might travel. *Untitled 20* includes a small self-portrait of the artist: a photo of Burson, taken 30 years ago, peering out a window. The photo is easy to miss, for it too is obscure and hard to read. It was made for an artwork that Burson began many years ago and symbolically marks the beginning of her own journey as an artist. Interspersed throughout these loaded compositions, in addition to the handwritten phrases from the letters and fragments of newspapers and photographs, are images of things discussed or referred to in the letters. These include dress patterns (her grandmother refers in the letters to a dress she was making for her mother), shoes, and chessboards, as well as references to more symbolic elements – dice, an eight ball, keyholes – and drawings of events that Burson herself experienced while visiting the cities where her grandparents lived. The practice of printmaking is at the heart of Burson's aesthetic efforts. Printmaking facilitates acts of serial repetition, transfer, and transcription that separate the artist's hand from the final artwork, and Burson adeptly employs the medium as both a method of unveiling moments from her family's past and a recognition of the unbridgeable distance between the artist and her ancestors.

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¹ Jeffrey Eugenides and Colm Toibin, "The Stuff That Won't Go Away," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2011.

² Bunny Burson, Artist's Statement, 2012.

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