

art on paper

Mary Coble

Mary Coble addresses issues of gender, sexuality, and discrimination in carefully researched, meticulously conceived endurance-based performances. Her topics range from hate crimes to the aversion-therapy techniques that were used for the “treatment” of homosexuality prior to its declassification as a mental disorder in the United States in 1973. “The seriousness of intolerance that I see in our society is one of the driving forces that leads me to create work,” Coble says. “I want to challenge people to reevaluate overly simplified and narrow understandings of a much more expansive reality.”

Like many artists working today, Coble makes use of a variety of media. Her incorporation of printmaking into *Blood Script*, her performance at the PULSE Contemporary Art Fair in New York earlier this year, was particularly poignant. The performance was based on three previous works—*MARKER NEW YORK* (2006), *MARKER DC* (2007), and *MARKER MADRID* (2008). In each, Coble stood silently for three hours as viewers wrote derogatory words on her body, words that had been spoken against them, that they had used themselves, or that they had heard used against others. For *Blood Script*, she selected seventy-five recurring words from those performances and had them tattooed, without ink, in an ornate script on her body, a process that took twenty hours. As the words surfaced in blood on her skin, an assistant pressed watercolor paper against them, producing a printed, mirrored image of each word that was then pinned to the wall. The physical pain Coble endured during the extended performance, as the verbal epithets were literally incised into her skin, became a metaphor for the deeply imprinted psychological wounds inflicted by hateful speech.

Coble’s use of her body as the central element in her work follows in the footsteps of Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, and others. Specifically, *Blood Script* recalls the controversial scene in Ron Athey’s 1994 performance presented by the Walker Art Center in which he cut patterns—based on African tribal scarring customs—into the back of fellow performer Darryl Carlton, pressed paper towels against the cuts, then attached the towels to a clothesline that extended over the audience. Both Coble and Athey use charged ideas about power, vulnerability, and the body to call attention to stereotypes and to the viewer’s conscious and unconscious biases. However, Coble’s comparatively minimalist approach—where the cutting of her own body and the resulting prints are the core of the performance—is a stark depar-

ture from Athey’s use of a “human printing press” as one element of a multiperformer spectacle—with overtones of religious and sadomasochistic ritual—that was realized when homophobia and fear of AIDS were at their peak.

Coble’s process literally references the lurid practices of criminals who slash prejudicial slurs into their victims in hate crimes, most frequently against gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered individuals. However, her use of a broad range of hateful language that is solicited from her audiences both creates a dialogue with and implies a complicity on the part of the viewer that transcend Athey’s use of spectacle. For *Blood Script*, Coble herself was both the actor and the stage, as well as the print matrix. (The blood prints remain after the physical scars have healed as a tangible



record of the psychological wounds the words represent.) Her work points to the ever-increasing openness of artists’ approaches to printmaking, beyond practical applications of dissemination and multiplicity for more purely conceptual purposes.

—*Shelley R. Langdale*

Above: Mary Coble, *Blood Script*, digital C-print with unique blood painting from a set of 8 (C-print: 24 x 20 in. each; blood painting: 8 1/2 x 11 in. each), 2008, portfolio edition of 7. Courtesy Conner Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C. © the artist