

Ann Conneman

What lies beneath the surface? What has been lost? What has been found? What has changed? What has always been there, but gone unnoticed?

What endures?

So much I (naively) believed in, that I never thought would disappear, is falling away or being exposed as myth. I write and letter to mourn these things, and give physical presence to what is vanishing.

In the midst of that disillusionment, I cut into a piece of stone that is 100 million or so years old. I walk or run to any corner of this beautiful place and inevitably something so true, so breathtaking enters my view where I least expect it. Remember hope and courage, it says; then quietly carries on, without fanfare, without us—despite us.

I fell in love with letterforms when I was a little girl—as a voracious reader and spelling bee competitor, their distinct personalities captivated me. I wrote my name and saw a caterpillar... the a was the head, the n's were legs skittering across the paper. Crayon-drawn letters sprouted limbs and faces; cursive writing was a proud obsession.

I went on to study at the Rhode Island School of Design where I was introduced to letterpress printing, papermaking, bookbinding, and lettercarving in stone—disciplines that combine writing, typography, design, and craft in the making of handmade objects. After graduating with a BFA in graphic design, I spent two years at the North Bennet Street School in Boston earning a diploma in bookbinding.

In the years since, while working as a graphic designer, I've continued to carve lettering in stone. My pieces have evolved to become more conceptual—found stones intrigued me with the mystery of what they had been part of; reading about Cape Ann's geology was a gentle reminder that our rocks have definitely NOT been here forever (though they feel that way). I began to write and carve my own words. Brush-drawn lettering, which was initially only a way to compose inscriptions for stones, took on a life of its own as a more immediate way to present my writing.

There is something incomparable about the process of creating this work. It begins with writing—scribbled, revised, revised again, messy, expressive, cathartic—reacting, distilling, putting words to what I see and feel. Lettering out these words with a brush and paint is a silent performance—a fluid, gestural, focused, slow-motion translation into visual presence. Carving is elemental—the physical removal of stone with a mallet and chisel. Words become tactile, dimensional, undeniable, permanent, enduring—an integral part of something that seemed unalterable.

Why do this work, in this way? It is arduous; letters and words are more easily produced, more disposable than ever. But I've come to realize that the process itself—the coalescence of those energies—holds the essence of what I am writing about, what I am looking for and trying to create. Is it truth? Honesty? Rightness? Balance, beauty, actuality... I'm not sure the word exists. It is the quiet vibrancy of emotion within a physical form.