

Toadhouse come to Wynwood's Gallery Diet

BY ANNE TSCHIDA
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From exhibition of works by Allen Graham (aka Toadhouse) at Gallery Diet in Wynwood through Nov. 2, 2013.

The two-toned graphite and off-white oil paintings hanging in Gallery Diet are deceptively simple. The text-based works from Toadhouse, also known as Allan Graham, can at first appear like poster-art. “You are here” reads one, in what looks like a type-font that might be used by a teenager.

But move in closer and amazing things start to happen. There is no font here, or even the use of tape to create these letters — they are all drawn free-form. The graphite lettering juxtaposed against an almost dirty white background — created from layers and layers of a very thin paint — start to look more like symbols or hieroglyphics. Standing in front of a painting that relates “you are here” leaves a strange after-taste when you turn around and are no longer “here.”

The exhibit from the New Mexico-based artist, *Why Is Reality a Word*, is not really meant to be a mind game. But it’s hard to not to take it as such while contemplating the long black-and-white, banner-like painting that covers the back wall of the main space at Diet.

At first it is hard to decipher. Like early Egyptian inscriptions, it looks like a line of pictographs; little triangles, squares, maybe even simple drawings of fish? But with some guidance, you can see that it actually reads “space takes a trip (.com).” The use of negative space here is incredible. Look at the black on white on one level and these canvases look like abstract geometric designs; invert the way you are looking at the white as background and bring it forward, and you can read the text.

On the eve of his 70th birthday, with two more shows opening up in New York and New Mexico, Graham seemed to be having fun on opening night as he explained his work, the first time it’s been shown in Miami. The text-based paintings, he said, helped him to forgo the arduous process of giving titles to his works — they are already there.

As for his moniker, Toadhouse? That has a more complex history.

Literally, it derived from an excavation in front of his house near Sante Fe. In a huge hole that he and his son dug, toads congregated. But it also has resonance with his love of Eastern, particularly Buddhist, philosophy. He says that frogs in China were also called “brains,” because their lumpy backs resembled that organ that allows us to have a conscience, to think, and to read. In that sense Toadhouse is a wonderfully revealing name for the artist and his work.