



**ARTIST**

Judy Natal

**TITLE**

The Hermetic Alphabet, R

**DATE**

2004

**DIMENSIONS**

20 in H x 16 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**IMAGE NOTES**

20x16" - portfolio of 26 prints

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2004.019

**CURRENT LOCATION**

Judy Natal Hermetic Alphabet Box

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**JUDY NATAL**

**BORN**

1953

**BIRTHPLACE**

Chicago, IL

**GENDER**

Female

## CITIZENSHIP

United States

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2003

Main Gallery, 2004

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 122

Contact Sheet 126

## BIOGRAPHY

Judy Natal is a professor of photography at Columbia College in Chicago. Her work is the collection of institutions including the California Museum of Photography, Center for Creative Photography, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, among many others. Her work has been exhibited at Projects International, The Nelson-Atkins Museum, and the Sao Paulo Biennial, among other venues. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in August 2002.

[www.judynatal.com/](http://www.judynatal.com/)

## ESSAYS

The Hermetic Alphabet is part of an ongoing series of works photographically investigating language and landscape. I returned to Chicago, the place of my birth, after twenty years in Rochester, New York, to accept a teaching position at Columbia College in 1997/98. A year later, I accepted an artist residency at Joshua Tree National Park in California, because the desert was a complete mystery to me then and Joshua Tree's alien landscape somehow visually represented the unfamiliarity I felt living in Chicago. From 1999-2001, I created an ambitious series of photographic works entitled EarthWords, with the assistance of two Illinois Arts Council Photography Fellowships (1999 and 2002) and two Polaroid Artist Support Grants (1999 and 2000). My photographic fascination with alphabets continues where EarthWords left off. Between 2002 and 2004, I created four photographic alphabets - Joshua Tree A-Z, a children's book of photographs of Joshua Trees in the shape of each of the 26 letters (Joshua Tree A-Z will be published by Center for American Places in Fall 2005); Las Vegas Neon Boneyard A-Z, an alphabet photographed at the Las Vegas Neon Museum's outdoor collection of historic casino signs; Hocus Pocus A-Z, 26 studio constructions exploring the nature of still life, intersections of science and magic, using neon letters as the source of illumination; and The Hermetic Alphabet, a limited edition portfolio of 26 black and white photographs. Inspired by Victor Hugo's A Hieroglyphic Alphabet and his statement: "Human society, the world, all mankind exists within the alphabet.....Free masonry, astronomy, philosophy, all the sciences take it as their indiscernible but genuine point of departure; and this is as it should be.....Thus, first, there is man's house and architecture, then man's body, both its structures and deformities, next justice, music, the church; war, harvest, geometry, mountains; the nomadic life, the life enclosed; astronomy; work and rest; the horse and the serpent; the hammer and the urn, which can be inverted and joined to make the bell; trees, rivers, paths; finally, fate and God; there you have the contents of the alphabet." The Hermetic Alphabet combines photographs I have made all over the world while traveling over a ten year period with the projectory of a found, three dimensional alphabet. It collides the evolutionary timeline of man, speeding toward an uncertain future, with the finite predictability of A-Z. Currently, I am working on American Alphabet. February 2004 I left Chicago with my dog Sparky, in a used, silver minivan that I named Shamu, to journey along roads traveled by artists who have powerfully influenced my artistic development. With my dead but no less present, iconic travel companions- Walker Evan's American Photographs, Robert Frank's The Americans, John Steinbeck's Travels with Charley in Search of America, Gary Winogrand's 1964 - in the back of the van, I went searching for the heart and soul of America. What is evolving is a hopeful, heart-felt portrait - or more precisely - a primer of American diversity. --Judy Natal received her MFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York in 1978. She has taught photography ever since; for the past seven years in the Photography Department of Columbia College, Chicago Illinois where she is a tenured professor in both the undergraduate and graduate photography programs. She has traveled extensively and her work is internationally exhibited and collected. Natal has been the recipient of numerous grants, fellowships and artist residencies and has conducted workshops and lectured widely throughout the United States and Canada. In the series Hocus Pocus, Judy Natal continues her ongoing visual investigation of letterforms, calling to mind the alphabet's magical history, and its participation in occult practices and contemporary signage in places dependent on illusion, such as Las Vegas. Natal's photographs become a stage show where tricks may be played to deceive the viewer, or through a sleight of hand and the incantation of a few precisely ordered letters, something startlingly truthful emerges. The stage in these photographs, a small, but highly controlled field, is a square of saturated colors floating in a dark space, devoid of context. Light and shadow direct, and as in a magic trick, sometimes misdirect the viewer's attention. Often a layer of fabric hides something from our gaze, which is at times manipulated to shift attention from what is plainly visible. This magic trope calls up a whole tradition of the image's status as dangerous, having power to deceive, and at the very least, distracting attention from what is important - the word. In these photographs, curtains often assist Natal's magic act and her concern with artfulness. The subtle cleverness of curtains pulled aside as in a Vermeer painting, is theatrical. It transforms the ordinary into a spectacular display. A curtain opens on a silver pitcher filled with flowers, suggesting a detail from the seventeenth century painting Still Life with Flowers, Goblet, Dried Fruit, and Pretzels by Dutch artist Clara Peeters. The traditional significance of still life is that it is a poignant reminder of the transience of life. Its appearance here points up the artifice of such symbolic transformations. The drama of the vanitas theme maintains its historical heft, but the sliver of a neon letter curving at the back of the space makes one somewhat uncomfortably aware of how dependent it is on a rigidly defined code. Natal's is not a harsh critique, but a subtle revelation, like the glow emitted by the letter beneath a soft green curtain, illuminating and activating the space. Another image restages a mysterious seventeenth century Spanish painting by Juan Sanchez Cotan, Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber, again raising questions of artifice. A brilliant trompe l'oeil full of a precise attention to detail, the image retains the ambiguities of Sanchez Cotan. Natal furthers the uncertainty of meaning by suspending a neon "Y" in the composition of ordinary fruits and vegetables. There is no visible curtain in this image. All is in plain sight. Yet, even the powerful white glow emitted by the letter does little to dispel the viewer's hermetic experience of this image. However, coupled with another image in the series, the photograph begins to reveal its meaning as

letterforms do - as parts of a system of signification, rather than isolated signs. Here, the curtain itself becomes an explicit subject, taking the shape of a letterform. Fabric falls from two suspended points to form the letter "M" centered in a glowing space. It is not what lies behind the curtain, but the veil itself that Natal invites the viewer to contemplate. Seen as a system, these photographs become a meditation on the history of visual practices and their relation to the perceived reliability of written language. The "hocus pocus" may lie in the way these images refuse to acquiesce to a simple binary opposition of image and text. Language, in the form of letters, always enters into the performance as in the case of the neon letter "G" which appears alone, almost fully revealed behind a grayish blue curtain. There are no flowers or vegetables, no historical references to still life or trompe l'oeil, only a letter. A letter, however, is never simply itself. By its very presence the "G" conjures up all the rest of the alphabet, reminding the viewer that the alphabet - invented more than 4,000 years ago - is invested with magical powers as strong as those associated with imagery. A disarmingly simple technology that can be mastered even by children, the alphabet is as tricky as any image. This image of the letter "G" apparently even undermined Natal's own sense of Hocus Pocus, which she had thought complete. Now she realizes this is merely the beginning of an extended series of photographs. Even these few fragments train the eye to question what is shown, what remains hidden, and the magical illusions and revelations of image and text. Debra Parr (c) 2003 Judy Natal lives in Chicago, IL, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in August 2002. Debra Parr lives in Chicago, IL, and is a professor of art history at Columbia College, Chicago. Train of Thought: Serial Images from the Light Work Collection Train of Thought presented the work of five photographers from the Light Work Collection, including Hollis Frampton, Arnold Gassan, Peter Max Kandhola, Judy Natal, and Aaron Siskind. Several photographs from each artist were exhibited with the intention of providing viewers, especially students, an opportunity to follow an artist through many different stages and approaches to one idea or subject and the chance to witness and consider their creative process through multiple images. Through the generosity of Robert and Joyce Menschel, Light Work recently received a donation of 150 photographs, including fifteen silver gelatin prints by preeminent photographer and educator Aaron Siskind (1903–1991). The images by Siskind included in this exhibition are strong examples of his interest in exploring the formal and abstracted views of urban decay—peeling paint, torn signs, and bits of graffiti. Like the other artists in this exhibition Siskind's work documented and ordered the world he encountered around him, with a unique ability to show us the profound beauty of the ordinary. Siskind viewed the photograph as a unique physical object in its own right, in contrast to many images today that exist only virtually. He stated, "When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order —(unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder)." Train of Thought included a variety of "altogether new objects," as each of the artists included can be said to have uniquely documented and ordered their world. Artist Judy Natal combined images made over a ten-year period while traveling the world to create her portfolio, The Hermetic Alphabet, a series of twenty-six silver gelatin prints. Natal used the alphabet as a structure on which she could organize and connect a series of seemingly random, ambiguous images. As the work moves us through the alphabet from A to Z, Natal investigates language, landscape, and travel. Arnold Gassan, a widely recognized authority on photographic processes as well as the history of photography, created the series Elegy in dedication to his mentor and teacher Minor White. The rich, elegant surfaces and tonal range of Gassan's images are created using the labor-intensive, antiquated process of photogravure. His images show familiar rural scenes of clotheslines, picket fences, landscapes, and portraits of friends and family. The exquisite care he takes in printing points to his belief that, "the photograph often leaves a residue of un-verbalized meaning." No Birds Do Sing in Blue Sky, a collection of eighteen unique silver gelatin prints by Peter Max Kandhola, continues his exploration of death and grief, an idea he has approached with several different photographic mediums over the years. In this series the artist scratches and distresses his negatives as a visual metaphor. His purpose for manipulating the negative is described in his statement that, "images come and go, they flicker unsolved, and time builds itself around them. We invent explanations which also remain unsolved, but we also retain the meaning of episodes in our past life, a museum of images." ADSVMVS ABSVMVS is a portfolio of chromogenic prints by Hollis Frampton, an artist and educator who worked in both still photography and the avant-garde film movement known as "New America Cinema," which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. He used his camera to record and order his unique collection of plant and animal specimens found in his travels, including road kill and delicacies from an Asian grocery. Each color photograph is paired by text of the object's Latin name, history, and mythology. Although his texts borrow the language and model of scientific classification, his version is quirky, personal, and humorous. His array of oddities and the stories of their discovery relay an artist's creative process of trolling his neighborhood for inspiration. Photographers and artists often seek an underlying structure or pattern in the world around them. As hundreds of students walked through this exhibition, some carrying cameras and a photo assignment, they were able to see how five different artists went fishing for inspiration and made, as Siskind said, "order out of chaos." Mary Lee Hodgens