



# in contemporary art

**F**raktur combines decorative lettering and (typically) cheerful images. Countless artists have paired words and images, but fraktur did far more than that. It recorded the life-cycle events of individual members of a community and preserved their ethnic heritage.

Viewing the work of a group of contemporary artists that I will call Millennial Urban Rustics (MUR) through the lens of fraktur reveals the importance to them of the idea and ideals of community. These artists emerged at the turn of this century in a couple of places across this continent. Like fraktur, their work combines words and images to express identity and memory. In response to the digital age, they create art that has the homespun, timeworn patina of folk art.

Most of the Millennial Urban Rustics emerged as members of artists' collaboratives formed between 1995 and 2002 in San Francisco, Providence, Winnipeg, and Philadelphia. Almost all are art-school educated and yet their art seems to spring fully formed from a subculture of punk rock, skateboarding, surfing, and graffiti.

Under-resourced yet resourceful, and spurred by ecological concerns and punk's do-it-yourself ethos to remake, remodel, and recycle, MUR artists paint on flat and aggregated surfaces composed of found objects. Their images are quirky and folksy, their lettering eccentric, embellished, and always distinctive—like fraktur. Though spread from coast to coast, these artists know one another well, often collaborating and exhibiting together. They are a community of communities.

The sprawling wall works of **Barry McGee** (Fig. 1) are compositions of disparate items fit tightly together. McGee's human subjects are down-and-out urban men, depicted in subdued shades of black and white. By contrast, his abstract work looks like quilting-patterns-as-op-art. The texts in McGee's work are bold and bright interpretations of the graffiti aliases he uses: Ray Fong, Lydia Fong (McGee is half Chinese by descent), Twist, and graffiti crews such as DFW (Down for Whatever). By incorporating his graffiti personae into his clustered wall works, McGee bridges his dual identity as a graffitist and an oft-exhibited and avidly collected "gallery artist." There is a distinctly urban tension as well as a sense of



*Fig. 1. Untitled by Barry McGee (1966–), 2012. Acrylic on panel, 58 1/2 by 49 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Ratio 3, San Francisco.*

*Fig. 2. Main Drag by Margaret Kilgallen (1967–2001), 1998. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist and Ratio 3.*



Fig. 3. *This Place Is Ours* by Jim Houser (1973–), 2005. Acrylic on paper collaged on canvas, 40 inches square. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

Fig. 4. *Frances Loves Katherine* by Shelley Spector (1960–), 2005. Wood and paint; height 9, width 6, depth 6 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

melancholy in his work. He commemorates the San Francisco of his youth before the influx of digital dollars as well as the pre-modern world he never knew—one without consumerism and the related anxieties of urban life.

**M**argaret Kilgallen (see Fig. 2) was a painter with a passion for letter forms that she shared with Barry McGee, her husband and frequent collaborator. Kilgallen responded to the coded messages and aliases of hobos and the music of Appalachia, especially its female musicians. Unassuming but self-reliant women dominate her figurative work. Recorded in Kilgallen's art are the names of revered female folk musicians, California place-names, and surf slang.\*

Raised in Maryland, Kilgallen's family took day trips to the Pennsylvania Dutch Country, where she absorbed the visual culture of the area, quilt patterns in particular. She painted on four-by-eight-foot sheets of plywood and large stretches of canvas, creating works that look like quilts writ large—"women's work" on a monumental scale. Her art is modern in its feminism, yet—like

\* See Alex Baker's essay "Matokie Lives" in *Margaret Kilgallen: In the Sweet Bye and Bye* (Roy and Edna Disney/California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 58–71.

McGee's—evinces nostalgia. It "remembers" in words and pictures.

**Jim Houser** is a visual artist with a poet's sensibility whose work explores the relationship between the look, sound, and meaning of words and the things they represent. His painted words suggest snippets from overheard conversations or an inner monologue of his own. Houser creates enveloping environments by painting directly on walls, ceilings, and floors, then layering on clusters of paintings, drawings, and a variety of objects that he has transformed with paint: sneakers, basketballs, flowerpots, skateboard decks. *This Place is Ours* (Fig. 3) refers to a strip of Nantucket beach where the late Rebecca Westcott (1976–2004), Jim's wife and fellow artist, was raised and where her ashes are scattered.

**Shelley Spector** finds, gathers, and sorts objects, and then reassembles them in new contexts, imagining and reimagining the details of the American past and present. Her installation *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through September 27, was

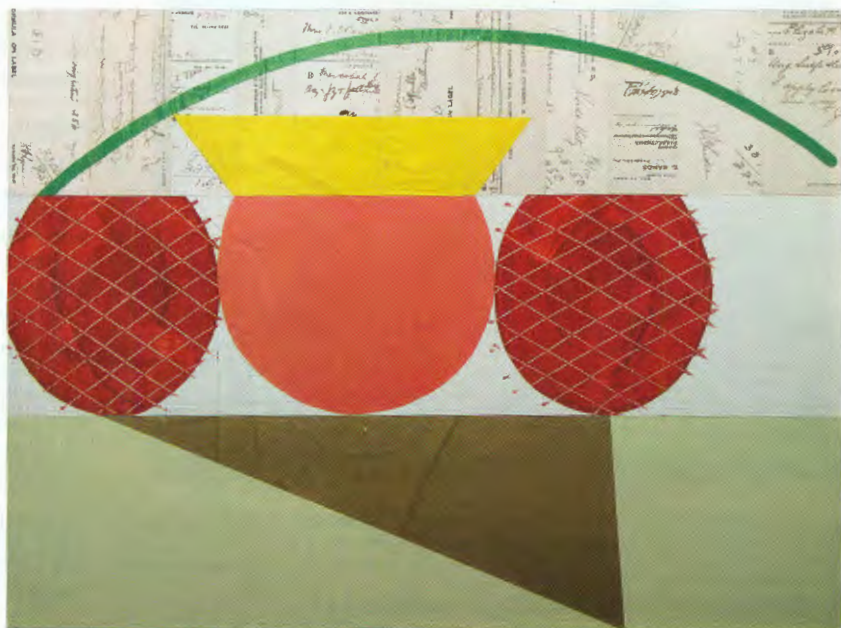


inspired by a large embroidery designed by folk art historian Frances Lichten and embroidered by her mother, Cecelia, with the familiar Pennsylvania German motifs of birds, flowers, angels and hearts. Completed in 1943 it was given to the Philadelphia Museum of Art by Katherine Milhous, an artist and Lichten's companion of forty years, following Lichten's death in 1961. *Frances Loves Katherine* (Fig. 4) makes material Spector's imagining of the life they shared. "Give Sunshine to Others" is inscribed on the tiny cottage roof.

**J**oy Feasley blends nature, the supernatural, and memory. *Memorial Picture* (Fig. 5) was inspired by a trip to the Ephrata Cloister—once the settlement of a separatist sect that included America's first fraktur artists. Inside the blooms of this potted plant are the curvaceous outlines of fraktur letters—the initials of people dear to Feasley but whom she hadn't seen in some time and was remembering.

Pennsylvania German art didn't end with folk art. A practicing Mennonite, **Timothy Gierschick** makes paintings, drawings, and sculpture incorporating traditional Pennsylvania German tools and techniques and commonplace materials such as found wood and house and sign paint. In describing *Goldpot* (Fig. 6), Gierschick says he sees it "as a self-conscious, post-modern version of the stylized forms found in fraktur: flowers, landscapes, architecture—and household objects, like pots. My use of abstracted and stylized forms is directly linked to that of traditional fraktur artists. They, innately, saw a link between living life and representing it. So do I."

Art is communication. Fraktur documented events, capturing its time, place, and people for posterity. Unlike fraktur, words in contemporary art are not always plainspoken. They may be, or appear to be, random. Nonetheless, they speak and encourage replies—they are, as Gierschick has pointed out, icebreakers in the conversation between artist, object, and viewer.



**MATTHEW F. SINGER** is Senior Museum Writer at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This article is an excerpt and adaptation of his essay "In Other Words: The Spirit of Fraktur in Modern and Contemporary Art," which will appear in the book *Framing Fraktur: Pennsylvania German Material Culture and Contemporary Art*, edited by Judith Tannenbaum and to be published by the Free Library of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania Press in June 2015.

**Fig. 5. *Memorial Picture* by Joy Feasley (1966–), 2007. Vinyl paint on medium density overlay plywood, 15 by 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.**

**Fig. 6. *Goldpot* by Timothy Gierschick II (1976–), 2010. House paint, enamels, collage on panel; 15 by 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.**