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Rebecca Watson Horn



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INTERVIEW

Rebecca Watson Horn by Caitlin Keogh

Paintings that playfully
interrupt language's
legibility.

JUNE 24, 2026



Rebecca Watson Horn, *Sigil 104*, 2026, oil on jute on canvas, 67 × 53 inches. Photo by Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

I spoke by phone from Brooklyn to São Paulo, Brazil, where the painter Rebecca Watson Horn spent the past seven months preparing for her [current show](#) at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel. The following conversation revisits themes we have discussed together over the last twenty-two years of friendship, with a particular emphasis on Rebecca's current work and practice. We met as students at the Cooper Union and have developed highly divergent styles and methodologies while sharing historical fascinations and formal vocabularies.

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Caitlin Keogh

We both paint lines a lot, and I think for both of us painting a line is connected with language and with something like a voice, with speaking. In your work, when you're painting a line, does it feel like it's a gestural mark? And because lines are so strongly associated with drawing, could you talk about how much drawing is a part of your painting practice? Do you make a drawing and copy it, or is the line as you paint it more fully enveloped in that experience of putting paint to canvas?

Rebecca Watson Horn

My favorite kinds of lines are the ones that are most strongly delineated through a process of erasure: a line that gets found, a line that remains through an accumulation of paint at its edges. Some lines aren't delineated by color on either side but expand into a field and become more of an edge. In my work, all form begins with line, and, as you imply, all form, shape, and field begins with language. The sculptural, tactile, and physical presence in my work is so emphasized that sometimes I think the lines feel like crevices between dense planes of color or form. I associate this material experience with Piet Mondrian. If I had only ever seen photographs of Mondrian, I wouldn't have been interested, but when you encounter one in person, you realize how much the lines work as hollow crevices between sculptural fields of color. That's the kind of line-work I'm interested in. It's emptied.

CK

This is so interesting. It's exactly Lygia Clark's idea of the "organic line," which is an idea that she developed specifically from looking at Mondrian, and it's about lines that exist by things pressing against each other. It's a line created by an absence, but it's defined by the pressure of multiple things coming together. There are allusions to text in a lot of your paintings, so I was thinking about the line in relation to writing. But there are a lot of absences and truncations in what you're showing us. Could you talk a little bit about how text is falling apart or is becoming physicalized somehow, and how lines connect to that?

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RWH

Writing is an extension of the body. And the text that I'm thinking about is a language that exists inside the imagination, not so much a language that exists on the page. I start with phrases, but they go through a process of being stripped of their conventional legibility and move into a different kind of legibility within abstraction. I'm trying to depict how language exists in our bodies. We're in an anxious moment with language because there are all these words that used to mean something that seem to not mean anything anymore in the political moment we're in. Moving language into an abstract space feels like a more realistic depiction of how we are actually experiencing language at the moment. And, perhaps in an attempt to ground that anxious place, I'm emphasizing the intense materiality of the surface, and the letterforms start to appear as limbs or bodies.

I like the idea of letters being apparent in the work as a moment of curiosity that draws one in, but also that any attempt to read them is almost immediately abandoned. I begin with a phrase, but the paintings go through many layers, and there's a lot of erasure, and sometimes phrases get added on top of phrases. And so by the time the painting is finished, they've also moved into a space of abstraction for me. Within this process is an accumulation of decisions and of time, and meaning is formed in the process. There's a beautiful passage in one of Pier Paolo Pasolini's essays where he talks about history as an accumulation of sedimentation and residue, which comes to mind in relation to the line as crevice, but also to language.

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Rebecca Watson Horn, *Sigil 106 (Higienópolis)*, 2026, oil on jute on canvas, 67 x 53 inches.
Photo by Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

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CK

I think the distrust of language that you mention is an animating effect in your work in the way it plays with letterforms, so it's interesting to hear that you hope that the viewer will also experience a mistrust of the representation of text in the paintings. Where do you find the phrases?

RWH

I've done different things. Most of the phrases come out of my meditation practice; they are phrases that facilitate bringing the mind into a more present moment. I'd like to see if my painting can be at service to fostering mind states that I myself find helpful, like distancing myself from my own thoughts. And perhaps they could also have a gnostic transmission to the viewer as well, if you believe in that.

CK

Like covertly. There's something covert going on.

RWH

Sure. But the word *covert* feels devious. And I'm saying that maybe language is covert. Maybe the convention of legibility is actually the manipulation, and stripping away that convention is actually a more straightforward form of communicating. Do you know what I mean?

CK

Yes, I'm thinking about how, in myth-speech, in semiotics, a sign has another political message smuggled into it. So what you're doing is trying to take apart a word or a sign and suggest fragments of signs so that nothing could be smuggled in other than just the energy?

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RWH

When I'm rejecting conventions of legibility, I'm not necessarily pursuing simplicity or, god forbid, purity. Myth-speech, storytelling, metaphor all interest me, and there is no simple, pure truth—that's false and dangerous. Maybe layered, metaphor-rich, mythic speech in all of its complexity and all of its contradictions is actually more real. And this idea that we can get to some kind of essence of truth is dangerous. It's within the layering and within the complexity that history is built: in painting and elsewhere. It's in the erasures, which may visually disappear but remain psychically present. Walter Benjamin depicts history as layer upon layer of crisis upon crisis, and tragedy upon tragedy.

“Whatever clumsiness there might be to the shapes, they acquire authority through all the labor and effort required in rubbing the paint into the surface.”

— Rebecca Watson Horn

CK

You use an unusual textile surface—a really wide-open burlap—to make your paintings. What does the scale of it do, and all of the texture and transparency of it? What does that do in your practice, physically, while you're making your paintings or even in terms of how you're putting an image together?

RWH

Unlike you, I have a very unwieldy hand. It's clumsy and all over the place. Early on I understood that if I can move the paintings into a more sculptural space and create buffers and friction, that will slow my hand down.

CK

You want a grippy surface.

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RWH

I needed a difficult surface that would resist my hand and slow it down. Then the marks become intentional because every mark requires a lot of effort. Whatever clumsiness there might be to the shapes, they acquire authority through all the labor and effort required in rubbing the paint into the surface. And there's tension and humor there, too, in that contradiction.



Installation view of *Rebecca Watson Horn: A palavra errada, 2026*. D'Aloia & Gabriel in São Paulo, Brazil. Photo by Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

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CK

The almost Velcro level of resistance in the surfaces is the textile acting back at you in a pretty intense way. And at the same time, the textile is very open. It has a delicacy and transparency, and a kind of lightness that also suggests a skepticism about painting itself. Air can just go right through it.

RWH

Because of the surface texture, they resist being photographed; and when you see the paintings in person, they sometimes resist being seen. They can almost vibrate, like TV static, and the image falls apart. Then you're forced into their physicality, and the material insists on being experienced through the other senses, such as the feeling of rubbing or dragging. Even if you're not physically touching the painting, you understand what that might feel like. So they give you a multiplicity of sensorial experiences that paradoxically deemphasize the visual field.

CK

But also, your paintings have always, for me, evoked figurative spaces. The letterforms and the shapes suggest an old-fashioned, cartoonish, theatrical space. I get the feeling of these characters interacting on a raked stage or with curtains hanging down slightly covering things, and things coming out from the wings. There's a question about how this word or letterform—or a thing that may not be either—is performing in this space. Could you talk a bit about this playful stage-space in the paintings, if that description even resonates for you?

RWH

It does resonate. When I'm talking about depicting language in the body or language in the mind, it's kind of like how if you close your eyes and try to imagine your thoughts, the space inside the mind is very theatrical. There's even a fourth wall where the eyes are. And so I think the frame of a painting is a very effective metaphor for that kind of mental space. So if we're thinking about a depiction of that, the paintings are not very deep, right?

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CK

Sure. But I think that's what it's like to me: there's a backdrop, there's maybe like two or three wings, and then there's footlights or something. It's like a box.

RWH

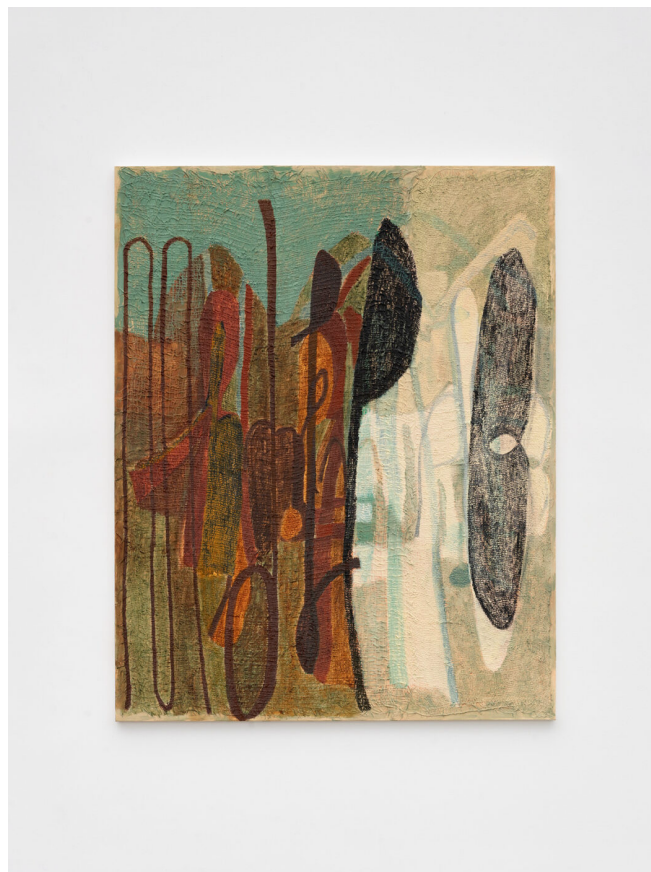
I don't even think it's that deep. I honestly think it's like the depth of the forehead to the back of the skull. Like, it's eight inches.

CK

But you can put a lot in there.

RWH

Yeah, exactly. We put everything in there.



Rebecca Watson Horn, *Sigil 108*, 2026, oil on jute on canvas, 67 × 53 inches. Photo by Eduardo Ortega. Courtesy of the artist and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.

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CK

I know that Florine Stettheimer is big for you, and her paintings also feel like they're in a theatrical kind of box, like they're in a bell jar. There's a snow-globe quality to that space, and even her studio was an artificial, theatrical environment.

RWH

She also made sets, dioramas, and dolls. Yeah, in addition to this show in Brazil, I'm also currently showing some very dark and particularly theatrical paintings in a [group exhibition](#) in Switzerland with Bob Smith's dioramas! I was never a draw-er as a kid. I didn't like holding pencils. I still don't like holding pencils, but I was very much a kid that loved making dioramas. You put a shoebox on its side, and then you cut construction paper and create a kind of dark theatrical scene. Did you see that Richard Foreman diorama?

CK

In the show at Matthew Marks? It was unbelievable. It was so beautiful.

RWH

It was unbelievable. And when I saw that, I said to myself, Why do I even make paintings? I just want to make dioramas. I'm always so jealous of Vincent Fecteau's work, and I'm excited to be showing with Bob Smith; it feels very relevant to my work.

CK

And it's a handmade artifice. To me, that seems like a position of resistance to the slick, toxic media-spectacle landscape that we are forced to wade through every single day.

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RWH

Yeah, these are the things that save me: the distance from my thoughts, the humor, the artifice, and the pleasure in the sensuality of the handmade. Often I just want to satisfy my own desire for tactility, and physicality, and handmade-ness, which I imagine is something that everyone is hungering for a little bit.

Rebecca Watson Horn: A palavra errada is on view at Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel in São Paulo, Brazil, until August 1; Horn's work can also be seen in the group exhibition Recursions at Emanuela Campoli in Zurich, Switzerland, until July 4.