

# AROUND THE GALLERIES

## An artist mines her Ps and Qs

By LEAH OLLMAN  
Special to The Times

Sleight-of-hand magic, say practitioners, depends on diverting the audience's attention. While a magician steers onlookers' eyes in one direction, he or she performs an act of concealment or revelation somewhere else. **Tauba Auerbach's** work has a marvelous, magical quality about it, but not puff-of-smoke, wave-of-wand, sleight-of-hand magic. Instead, it enacts a more profound perceptual trick, art's oldest ace in the hole: awakening us to the amazements of the ordinary and familiar.

Auerbach doesn't distract our gaze as much as she refines it, so that we're actively rather than passively perceiving. Her work originates in the everyday magic of cognition, the miracle of mind and eye in concert, transforming what we see into what we know. Her tools are the letters of the alphabet. Her focus is on the consonance and friction between the letters' dual roles as images and building blocks of meaning. In her subtly stunning show of works on paper at New Image Art, she reinvests those mundane modules of the alphabet with the power they were always meant to have but which has dimmed through regular, unceremonial use.

EY · BEE  
CEE · DEE  
EE · EF · DJEE  
EITCH · AI · JAY · KAY  
EL · EM · EN · OH · PEE  
KIEW · AR · ES  
TEE · YEW · VEE  
DUBBLYEW · EX  
WAI & ZEE

**SIGNING IN:** Tauba Auerbach reawakens viewers to letters as images and signifiers in works such as "How to Spell the Alphabet."

"Eye Exam #4" features rows of black block letters in diminishing size, typical of an eye chart, except every one is the letter "C." With clinical cleanliness, Auerbach sets in motion a delightful, punning circularity. In "How to Spell the Alphabet," each letter is written out in red, phonetically: ey, bee, cee, dee, ee, ef, djee and so on through ex, wai and

zee. The self-reflexivity of language describing itself has provocative charm, and Auerbach's use of a lettering style that's vaguely retro gives the page an appealing graphic buzz.

Auerbach works as a sign painter in San Francisco, practicing old-fashioned techniques of hand lettering. The process, she notes in her artist's statement, "is slow and beautiful and personal."

Three large (about 4 feet tall) ink-on-paper pieces in the show read as love letters (pun intended) to the alphabet. Each is an extravagant calligraphic interpretation of a single letter. Exquisite swirling strokes are edged by fine scalloped lines and complemented by delicate geometric tracery. The letters themselves are nearly impossible to identify. They've been subsumed by the beauty of their own ornamentation, like the capital letters of illuminated manuscripts.

In another piece, Auerbach lays out the Braille alphabet as black dots in a pencil-line grid, again emphasizing the visual pattern of a code designed as a vehicle for meaning. Auerbach raises intriguing questions about the relationship between sign and signifier (a hot and heady theme among contemporary artists) with refreshing concreteness.

Her art immediately brings to mind the installations of the late Margaret Kilgallen. Auerbach shares with Kilgallen (a friend from overlapping years at Stanford) a dedication to craft, the work of the hand and a fascination with the vernacular.

In a few less penetrating pieces, Auerbach explores the differences between analog and digital representation. Those, along with a chandelier installation in a small, adjacent part of the gallery, are the only works of just moderate interest in the show. Otherwise, Auerbach carries us from piece to piece with humor and incisiveness, honing our gaze and attention.

A fantastic little accordion-fold book called "All True #1" is an experiment, she writes, "with using language to cheat itself." The book begins with the word "yes" facing one of its synonyms,

"consent." On the next page, "consent" is paired with one of its synonyms, "permission." These pairs of equivalent words continue one small step at a time up to the final word, "no," which follows logically and yet comes as a shock. Has Auerbach performed sleight-of-hand, changing "yes" into "no"? No, the language has done it itself, all under our

watchful eye. Auerbach has — not merely but cannily — acted as sculptor, massaging a material far more pliable than we ever imagined.

A debut show of an artist in her early 20s could hardly be more invigorating.

**New Image Art**, 1005 N. Fairfax Ave., West Hollywood, (323) 654-2192, through May 7. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.