

TRACY WILLIAMS, Ltd.
New York, NY

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Alyssa Pheobus

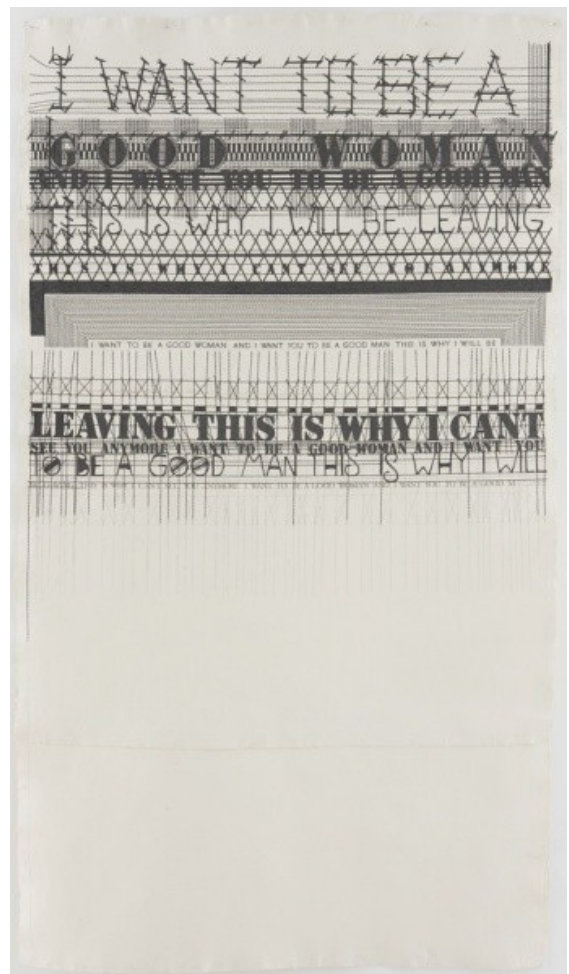
4/7/09 Bellwether

By Matthew Guy Nichols

New York

Pastiche and appropriation may be well-worn esthetic strategies that have circulated through the art world for at least 30 years, but the work of Alyssa Pheobus (who completed her MFA in 2008) confirms that these tactics remain vital and can transcend a reductive critique of originality. Like one musician “covering” another’s songs, Pheobus generally proceeds by extracting lyrics from popular music and poetry and “recording” them in large-scale, labor-intensive drawings, nine of which were on display in her first solo show (all works 2007 or 2008).

Pheobus draws on thick sheets of handmade, cotton rag paper that are glued together to form much larger rectangles (the largest work shown is 10 feet high). Using mechanical pencils, she often stencils her appropriated texts from left to right and top to bottom, methodically covering portions of the felt-like supports with heavy graphite impressions. Formal and conceptual precedents can be found in the paintings of Glenn Ligon and Christopher Wool, but Pheobus’s mark-making is distinctly eclectic. Her stenciled letters vary in size, spacing and font; many are enmeshed in patterned linear scaffoldings that evoke embroidered samplers. In *Good Woman*,



for example, the chorus of a love song by Cat Power repeats three times, the stitchlike inscription alternating with checkerboard designs and the repeating X shapes found in basic cross-stitch exercises. The drawing fades away about halfway down the tall, vertical support, appearing to end in a row of dangling threads that effectively underscore the lyrics of abandonment.

Perhaps due to their chromatic austerity, Pheobus's nubby graphite lines can also resemble barbed wire or the imprints of branding irons, associations that crystallize themes of aggression and pain frequently latent in her textual sources. This is true of *The Cruelties that Attend the Rites of Love*, where the printed title (excerpted from a Jean Genet novel) seems to bind two stacked rectangles of paper, each traversed by straplike bands of densely packed, thorny lines. Similar linear marks radiate defensively in *No Interest in Free Love*, creating a dark, bristling halo around a small blank rectangle in the center of the drawing.

A press release claims that Pheobus's drawings are "performative," which, arguably, could be said about every artist's practice. Nonetheless, Pheobus does enact a private and silent transcription of language that is ordinarily presented audibly and publicly. At minimum, this transformation induces reappraisal of some familiar words and phrases; at best it generates drawings that are quietly revelatory.

Above: *Good Woman*, 2008, graphite on cotton rag paper, 96 by 53 inches; at Bellwether.