



By Madaline Nusser

June 2005

Helen Mirra

## ART & DESIGN

# Mirra, Mirra on the wall

An artist's index of a philosopher's work defies category **By Madaline Nusser**

**H**elen Mirra makes deceptively minimal work. In the 2003 Venice Biennial, her pile of military blankets formed a visual analogy of water and land, and in her 2001 show at the Renaissance Society, indigo cloth triangles that spread across the gallery floor were based on

William James's book from 1897, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

Is it necessary to have read this pragmatic philosopher's essays to understand the exhibition? Although Mirra claims that the work doesn't rely on the book, intriguing index entries such as

shades of brown optically reverberate and the index of excerpts resembles a list of rules.

We usually think of the index as an objective reference in non-fiction books, used to locate topics that might be useful. Rather, Mirra shows us that indexes are really quite subjective by culling entries (and placing them in an alphabetized sequence) that she personally deems important. Several entries have to do with death, evil and melancholy. Here, Mirra's work transforms into something chillingly relevant, possibly pointing to the war. Her consistently rich, earthly palette becomes an army-green; the nostalgia of typewriter font and natural materials becomes a morose longing for a previous era.

By indexing James (as she did in past work with the German writer of narratives of memory,



**STRIP SEARCH** A detail from Helen Mirra's *Block-universe, 292*, made in 2005 with milk paint on ink and cotton.

Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome design. While her installations are visually simple and often small, they pack in loads of references—aesthetic, literary and historical—that are not easy to avoid. And "laws of clash, 247" at Donald Young Gallery is no different. Several approximately yard-long strips of fabric are lined up across the walls at eye level, covered in typewritten words and phrases. These strips create a long dashed line that, while small and slender, is an imposing presence on the clean white walls. It is both barely there and ostensibly present.

It takes more than a moment to recognize that this is a horizontally spanning index; Mirra has in past work used this 16mm cotton banding that seems to reference film. The typewritten font recalls dusty old books, which could be the first clue. More important information must be gleaned by reading the gallery materials: The phrases and words have been compiled by Mirra into an index to

"Potatoes call for salt, and cranberries for sugar, 273"; "Ethical ideas, 200"; and "jolt, jolt, jolt, 268" produce a desire to read James. The title of the exhibition, "laws of clash, 247," is also an index entry with a coinciding page number. Its meaning, like the exhibition,

## Review

### **"Helen Mirra: laws of clash, 247,"**

Donald Young Gallery,  
through Jul 16 (see West Loop).

may be regarded separately from James's written use. It reveals significance partly through its abstract, lyrical use of language and a similarly poetic use of materials. The word *clash* can mean to collide with noise, to come into conflict or to create an unpleasant visual impression when placed together. Mirra's work ties many of these meanings together: The noise of the monosyllabic words in the phrase sounds like cymbals clashing, the slight varying

W.G. Sebald), the artist must feel a certain sense of reverence for the author. Mirra participated in the lengthy and meticulous process of indexing his book, sifting through the information and gathering what is important. She is also in the process of moving from Chicago to teach at James's alma mater, Harvard. However, Mirra also implies some disagreements. The most poignant entry addresses the question of truth while self-referencing the index's own system of categorization. Taken from one of James's essays, the entry is also one of the longest. While most are relegated from one to four words, this one reads, "the simple classification of things is, on one hand, the best possible theoretic possibility, but is, on the other, a most miserable and inadequate substitute for the fullness of truth." In the end, Mirra's work teaches us that classification, which appears to be simple—a band of fabric, an index of words—is actually quite full. ■