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## Pfashən-uhble naan-sints

Dayon Royster  
*University of Iowa*

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# PFASHΘN-UHBLE NAAN-SINTS

by

Dayon Royster

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Anita Jung

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To those who are curious, may your rabbit holes be endless.

“Remember, at the end of the day even though you’re a scientist you are still a human being and human beings have intellectual frailties such as you believe your idea about how something works more than anybody else. That’s good to a point, but it’s possible to then start living your idea and you lose the ability to assess or to recognize evidence that conflicts with it to the point where you should just discard it.”

Neil deGrasse Tyson

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A huge thanks to everyone and every experience pleasant and not so pleasant that I’ve ever encountered. Maybe I’d be here without you but I imagine I’ll never know. Either way, thanks a bunch.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This body of work playfully focus on a wide array of social and cultural phenomena via the use of phonetics, exposing gaps in our intellect while fostering curiosity to fill those same gaps.

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# PFASHΘN-UHBLE NAAN-SINTS

Another chapter of my life is coming to a close, the Grad school chapter. A lot has taken place during the past three years and I'd like to chronicle some of those happenings in this thesis. Before I get going, I'm remembering my letter of intent that was submitted to the University of Iowa when I was applying. The first paragraph read "Now that the undergrad chapter is coming to a close, a particular question arises. "What about grad school?" Ah, what a terrific question! So original too. "What about it?"..."Well, do you want to go?" Why the hell would I want to go to grad school? Why would I want to put myself through 3 extra years of brutal critiques, constant failures, disappointments, dealing with the special breed of egotistical maniacs that art schools seem to specialize in providing and accrue more debt? Wasn't four years enough? If it was, would the question of grad school even pop in my head? Maybe. But since it did, I'm going to answer it. No, four years wasn't enough. Will another 3 years be enough? Only time will tell..."

Looking back on that letter of intent gave me a good laugh. Its clear to me from that first paragraph that being able to find the humor in life while remaining brutally honest is fundamental to my being. Art school definitely provides a healthy supply of egotistical maniacs. They just keep pumping them out...it never stops. But what is my answer now that three years of grad school has come and is almost gone? What about my goal of furthering myself as an artist during my stint in grad school? What am I making now...and how did I get to the point of making it? Well lets see...

Being in grad school at the University of Iowa has been quite interesting and as you can imagine, eye opening. My first thought after attending my first class alongside my fellow colleagues was "wow, these people are amazing and so is their work. They deserve to be here.

What do the faculty see in me and my work that made them decide to give me an opportunity to follow my dream of obtaining an MFA? Am I meeting some diversity quota? I mean, I am black and in Iowa, which is arguably one of the whitest states in the US so that's possible right?.. aha-ha." I think I googled that at some point during my first year and saw that Iowa is indeed pretty white being the 5th whitest state in the US. Anyways, my confidence as an artist was nowhere near where it is now. I constantly had a feeling of being inadequate during that first year of grad school. I wasn't going to let that or those thoughts stop me from taking advantage of this opportunity that was bestowed upon me for whatever reason. That semester I spent a lot of time trying to get my bearings. Workshop class was where I struggled the most. Could never seem to throw the ball back in terms of adding what I would consider to be worthy feedback. While taking print workshop I took litho and an art history course. I no doubt took litho because it was one of my strong suits and gave me an opportunity to hold onto some semblance of confidence during that first semester. My work during this semester was changing but still in the realm of surrealism like my work from undergrad. One of the biggest changes was pumping lots of color into my imagery where as before it was mainly black and white with a spot color. I distinctly remember professor Anita Jung saying in jest, "the grey skies of the midwest must be getting to you" to which I laughed and later realized was probably true. Along with visual aesthetic changes in my work, my mindset about my work was also changing. I'm now at an institution that puts a huge focus on concept, whereas my alma mater seemed to be more focused on technique. I was now starting to really think in depth about the ideas and concepts that were driving my work and trying to find a balance between that and technique. This is still a constant struggle and one that I hope never goes away. If it does, I'll know that my heart isn't in this anymore. One more mile marker before moving on. The first semester was

also politically charged with the presidential election. This was inspiration for some of the convos that took place in and around VAB and were later influential to some of my work.

The second semester brought on different challenges. Leaving workshop class behind and still tussling with the push and pull of concept and technique, I decided to be more experimental with my art practice and explore some different mediums that were outside of my comfort zone of printmaking. Most of these were in the realm of sculpture. Thinking sculpturally was fairly new to me and really exciting. Learning new skills was refreshing and just what I needed during my first year of grad school. I found that visually expressing some of the concepts that were floating around in my head made more sense in the 3D world as opposed to the 2D world I was accustomed to. One of the concepts I explored was Immanuel Kants concept of Phenomena and Noumena. Phenomena being the appearances that constitute our experience and noumena being the (presumed) actual things themselves that constitute reality. I found that making something interactive and that moved using magnets was far more expressive of that concept than anything I could or cared to do in a print at that time. The language of 2D and 3D are similar but also very different. Both have their place in the world of art. It was also around this time that I'm becoming more and more involved off campus getting to know people around town. Engaging in convos about heavy topics such as politics, religion, gender, and race. These convos are becoming increasingly interesting to me. Opinions from both sides begin percolating in my head a lot more than usual as the first year of grad school comes to a close.

The second year went a lot smoother than the first year. This was the year that Terry Conrad was added to the print faculty and my best friend from undergrad started his first year of grad school. My work also took a major turn during this year. Through the medium of silkscreen and digital printing I began to flirt with the use of humor in my work coupled with

text. I also started to use images of figures from pop culture in the form of memes to talk about some happenings around VAB. For instance, taking note of the language that was being used in workshop classes and artist talks, I started to notice a few common phrases that were being used quite a bit. One of those phrases was “developing a visual language”. It seemed to be on par with a cheap Hallmark platitude that makes you want to cringe upon reading it. I understand its use, but wondered; is there really no other way for some of the most creative people to word that phrase? Fashion a visual dialect or maybe even generate a visual lingo are some possible substitutes. Noticing those minor language uses, in contrast I made the huge leap of an assumption that “no wonder it seems as though there’s not really anything new in the art world. Everyone is just passively regurgitating everyone else’s words. We’ve become utensil wielding parrots in a way”. That is no doubt absurd and quite cynical, but it got me questioning, do people even recognize they’re doing it? How would they react once it’s been brought to their attention. To find out, I made a silkscreen using the image of Samuel L. Jackson from Pulp Fiction in the famous scene where he says “Say what again... I dare you motherfucker. I double dare you. Say what one more goddamn time”. Using that image, I printed text around it swapping the word “what” from that movie quote with the phrase “developing a visual language”. This piece was ironic in and of itself. I’m not only critiquing with a semi harsh tone of judgement or bringing attention to the notion that “everyone is just regurgitating everyone else’s words”, but I’m regurgitating the words of Samuel L. Jackson’s character from pulp fiction while using the image of someone else’s work but tweaking it a little and calling it my own creating quite the paradox. Alongside the memes I was making another series of text based work inspired from the howdy doody, upbeat facts on the underside of the caps of Snapple fruit drinks. I used this body of work to explore subject matter that was a bit more dark but also maintained a

bit of humor to soften the blow of a “hard pill to swallow”. The prints were created digitally and incorporated the image of the underside of a snapple cap. The digital removal of an upbeat Snapple fact was replaced with what I coined as a “Crapple” fact such as “with great power come absolutely no responsibility” which perverts the noble saying “with great power comes great responsibility”. The goal was to present a question without actually asking a question. I hoped that one reading that Crapple fact may be provoked and question the things they hold as truths and wonder why they hold them as truths in the first place. This is no doubt in the same vein as Jenny Holzer’s *Truism* series as she is one of the artist in constant rotation on my greatest hits list of inspirational artist. Also during this year, I ventured into making monoprints. This gave me the opportunity to work intuitively and create on the fly without having any end in site. This was much different from how I had typically worked before. My practice had been highly planned up to this point, and I rarely allowed for the opportunity to vary the result I had in mind. For once, I was creating in a more spontaneous manner reacting to the marks I made almost immediately after they were made. While making these I would title them with words from different languages. It was also around this time that I started noticing some small graffiti on some of the pipes in the art building and would take pictures of these and caption them like a title card you might see next to a painting in an art museum but with a made up language using phonetics. I would then post these photos to the social media platform known as instagram. From time to time I would receive a direct message from different followers stating that it took them anywhere from 15-30 min to decipher what the phonetic text read. I didn’t think much about it for almost the entire summer. Then I had a conversation with someone about a public figure who has been called a misogynistic, transphobic individual. Normally I wouldn’t bat an eye at such claims about someone, but this time I did, because I’d previously done some very

extensive research on this individual. I had witnessed this individual repeatedly rebuke misogynistic and transphobic individuals and their behavior prior to my acquaintance bringing this info to my attention. Naturally, I was skeptical and presented evidence that disproved what my acquaintance was claiming. The evidence presented was in video format of the public figure on numerous occasions rebuking the aforementioned individuals and their behavior. I then asked what made my acquaintance believe that the public figure in question was misogynistic and transphobic? They then sent me an op-ed article from the New York Times. After reading the article, it became very clear why they thought the things they did about the public figure in question. What wasn't clear was why even after the evidence I'd presented did they still hold onto their beliefs about the public figure? One could also ask; why did I hold onto my beliefs about the public figure after reading the op-ed article? I began looking into even more controversial topics after that interaction and noticed a seemingly similar undying loyalty to a certain perspective, regardless of what evidence is placed in front of people. This caused me to wonder, "if someone is that loyal to an ideology even after empirical evidence proves and/or supports the contrary, how do they know when they're being duped?" During my research, I came across what are known as hoax articles. These are articles that are intentionally submitted to peer-review journals for the purpose of exposing peoples susceptibility to fashionable nonsense. To my surprise this happens quite a bit and with some success of being published. One of the hoaxers, Alan Sokal a physics professor at NYU successfully submitted a hoax article to Duke University's academic journal Social Text. Social Text is known for being a journal that covers topics such as feminism, Marxism, neoliberalism, post colonialism, postmodernism, queer theory, and popular culture. Sokals article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" was submitted according to Sokal as an

experiment to see “if a leading North American journal of cultural studies – whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross – [would] publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions.” The hoax article was published in 1996 so I’d consider that a yes. It would seem that an undying loyalty to an ideology can be quite blinding and leave one open for trickery. I found it interesting that catering to the ideology of the editors via the use of buzzwords or phrases that appealed to them was enough to disarm the editor’s skepticism of the article. This isn’t the first or the only time that a hoax article has been published. If this happened with hoax articles, where else is this happening I wondered? Why didn’t the editor’s fact check the article? This situation seems very similar to the interaction I had with my acquaintance. They didn’t seem to care to fact check the op-ed piece but confidently adopted the opinion of the op-ed author about the public figure. With billions of people on the planet, I wonder how many are confidently adopting and even passionately arguing an opinion almost to or to the point of becoming violent when doing so when they clearly don’t have the entire story? I immediately think of soundbites and videos clips that have been edited to summarize a larger story or possibly control a narrative. It seems as though these soundbites and video clips can work in a similar way that hoax articles work, appealing to people’s worldview and tapping into what is known as a person’s confirmation bias. It has been said that confirmation bias has been linked to a time in human history when waves of new information wasn’t the norm and decision making was predominately survival based. Because of this, now that new information is constantly hurtling towards us like a fleet of interstate buses, we have created cognitive shortcuts to avoid being overwhelmed. This simplification saves us time but may also cause us to throw rational thinking to the wind, clouding our judgement, causing us to discard information on how

things actually are in favor of how we want or believe things to be. In order to get the whole story or at the very least a bigger picture of what one is seeing, doing some extra footwork is in store. In other words, one must read past the fucking headline to get the full story and maybe just maybe put their bias aside and be ready to get fucked up with some truth. I'm interested in finding ways to make the viewer slow down and really sit with what they're reading or interacting with until they fully understand it. And even then, not allowing for total comfort or confidence that they've gotten to the bottom of it. I want to spark the viewers curiosity.

Going back to the 15-30min it would take someone to decipher the phonetic text, I noticed a contrast in time compared to the 1-2min it would take me to compose a phrase. This contrast led me down a rabbit hole of thoughts and questions and because this is my thesis, I'm going to rattle off as many of those thoughts and questions that I want to and you can read them or not...the choice has always been yours! I began contemplating the format of information that's disseminated on various media outlets and how that's possibly shaping how quickly we dismiss or accept something as fact, truth, etc... Is the format of media outlets in fact doing just that? What happened to doing research? Are we becoming more comfortable with being spoon-fed an ideology? If the format of social media is doing just that, is it linked to our worldview or sense of morale? Are we more willing to accept something that lines up with our world view and less likely to accept something that doesn't? How much of the footwork are we actually doing in our research? Are we fact checking the fact checkers, watching the watchmen, policing the police? Why are people so sure of themselves on both or all sides of an argument? Are we arguing about things that we ACTUALLY know? Are we arguing the point of view from the supposed lived experience of an author? Are we arguing statistics that WE gathered? What is the objective truth? Is there even such a thing? Assuming that little to no footwork went into

gathering the information that we passionately discuss amongst ourselves, I wonder why become passionate about it in the first place? Passionate to the point of almost seeming proud to have found and studied the information that someone else has gathered. If a book or some other source lines up with my worldview, am I'm more likely to spend time with it? If it doesn't will I spend less time with it? Would the extra time spent on literature or whatever that goes against my worldview change it? Would it change anyone's or does the information fall upon deaf ears that were unwilling to hear the information in the first place? It seems as though as a society we like things to be quick and to be able to make decisions quickly. Rather than getting all the info we like sound bites and short clips of the larger discussion. What is that doing to us? Is this furthering our venture into becoming intellectual idiots? Are we becoming more comfortable with less information? Is less information to describe the whole becoming the new norm? If accepting something because it fits my worldview being taken advantage of? What are the effects of that? Do I have the tools to check the information that I'm given? Why am I or anyone so trusting of an "authority" on a topic? Don't other authorities mislead the masses on a regular basis? Willful suspension of disbelief seems to rear its head in these situations...should a willful suspension of belief be introduced? The list could go on, but those questions and more, influence the body of work in my MFA exhibit.

My current body of work playfully focuses on an array of topics such as but not limited to accessibility, bias, context, information, knowledge, research, rules and truth. These are topics that I constantly find myself engaging with in one way or another. One of the ways I've chosen to engage the audience with the topics of interest is via the use of black, white, and gray panels that are printed using a large format Océ printer. These black and white toned panels in this portion of my work symbolize the binary nature of opposing perspectives while the gray tone

symbolizes a merging of perspectives and/or something that is a commonality between two opposing sides. Coupled with these panels are phrases in a fabricated language that I've coined as hi-fenetiks. The font that these phrases are in mimics the font of an old-fashioned typewriter possibly giving the viewer a sense of nostalgia and a longing for a simpler time. My purpose however, is to link them back to their point of origin for me, Instagram's story feature. The panels are then intuitively installed on a wall in a manner that resembles the patchwork of an asymmetrical quilt. The overall height and width of the install infantilize the viewer as their eye moves from panel to panel to read the text. At first glance the viewer is confronted with what appears to be a foreign language darting their eyes across the install in search of something familiar. If one is adept in pop culture they may come across the panel "luh brawn jaymes....". The viewers, who recognize the word play taking place in this panel, will be hip to understanding that to decipher the rest of the panels, one must read them in a phonetic manner. That's not the only take away from this panel. Within the luh brawn panel, LeBron James is phonetically spelled multiple different ways. This alludes to the fact that each panel should be treated as an individual panel. I don't want the viewer to get too comfortable so as to easily find a rhythm. Each panel abides by its own rules. With this being said, there are similarities amongst the panels and knowing how to read one may hint at how another is to be read. One must hold paramount that each panel is its own panel. Now that the viewer has the basic underpinning to move forward, they can begin deciphering the surrounding panels possibly enjoying multiple "aha moments" upon successfully reading one. The text I've chosen to phonetically spell out come from various places. Some are from comedians, Dadaist, musicians, authors, poems, songs, manifestos and so forth while some are fashioned from my own thoughts to be sure to steer clear of anything overly cliché like "live, love, laugh". I decided for this portion of my

work that hanging them using pins and/or other notably temporary holds to express the impermanent nature of the install but to also express the quickness with how it was hung. This in tandem with each panel being printed quickly via the Océ contrast with the amount of time it can take the viewer to decipher a panel. An Océ printer can print a panel within seconds whereas reading a panel can take up a much longer time span depending on the viewer. The Océ panels also have a lowbrow feel to them, which continue the convo about lowbrow vs fine art. Moving from lowbrow to the “fine art” portion of my work, I’ve created a series of screen prints to invite the viewer to think about accessibility. This series also invites them to contemplate their own advantages and disadvantage based on their own vantage point based on their height and the angle at which they view each print. Each print is composed of three parts. A solid black background, the image of a person, and gray text. Much like the Océ panels, the text is printed in a phonetic manner but the screen prints introduce the visual element of the human figure. Something recognizable. The human figure is printed in such a way that depending on a person’s vantage point they will see one of a few different things. The viewer may see a solid background with just text in the forefront; they may see a solid background with a faint semblance of the human figure in the negative or the positive and sometimes both at the same time. Finding a vantage point that gives the viewer a clear picture in conjunction with deciphering the text challenges the viewer to do some self-reflection about their shortcomings and strengths and awakens a curiosity for knowledge that they may have had when they were 3 years old. When viewing the series with other people, the viewer is challenged to think of not only their own but other people’s shortcomings and strengths. Maybe even ask a fellow viewer to form an alliance in the name of deciphering each print. These prints are hand pulled and continue the conversation of lowbrow vs fine art. The last portion of this body of work is three

tarps, one black, one gray and one white. All the tarps are 4'x16' and hung right next to each other making the piece 12'x16'. Each tarp contains a segment of a larger text on it so alone, each tarp makes very little sense, but together they convey a seamless message about "prepackaged grievances". The sheer size of this piece makes the viewer feel small and makes the weight of the message feel much heavier. When I first came across the "prepackage grievance" quote, it was like a kick in the teeth. It caused me to think about the topic of privilege and how some people are considered to have been born with it. What else can someone be born with and what effect does it have on someone's psyche? Whatever it may be, is it healthy for one's psyche and how do we determine its healthiness on a spectrum of good to bad? Is it even quantifiable and if so how? To convey the weight that was felt when I read the quote I chose to display "Pre-packaged Grievances" at a large scale on a durable material to hint at the strength of the statement. The tarps demand attention and space being displayed on a wall by themselves whereas the smaller 24"x 36" panels wouldn't and don't achieve the same effect.

In conclusion, this body of work is very demanding of the viewer and will not come easy to all. It will require as much time as is needed, whatever that may be for an individual to pick up what is being put down. It will only be as miserable or as fun as you make it, so do it or don't. The CHOICE has always been yours.

Stay curious and dig until you dislocate a rotator cuff. Get it fixed and keep digging.



Figure 1, Installation View, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa



Figure 2, Installation View, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa



Figure 3, Installation View, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa

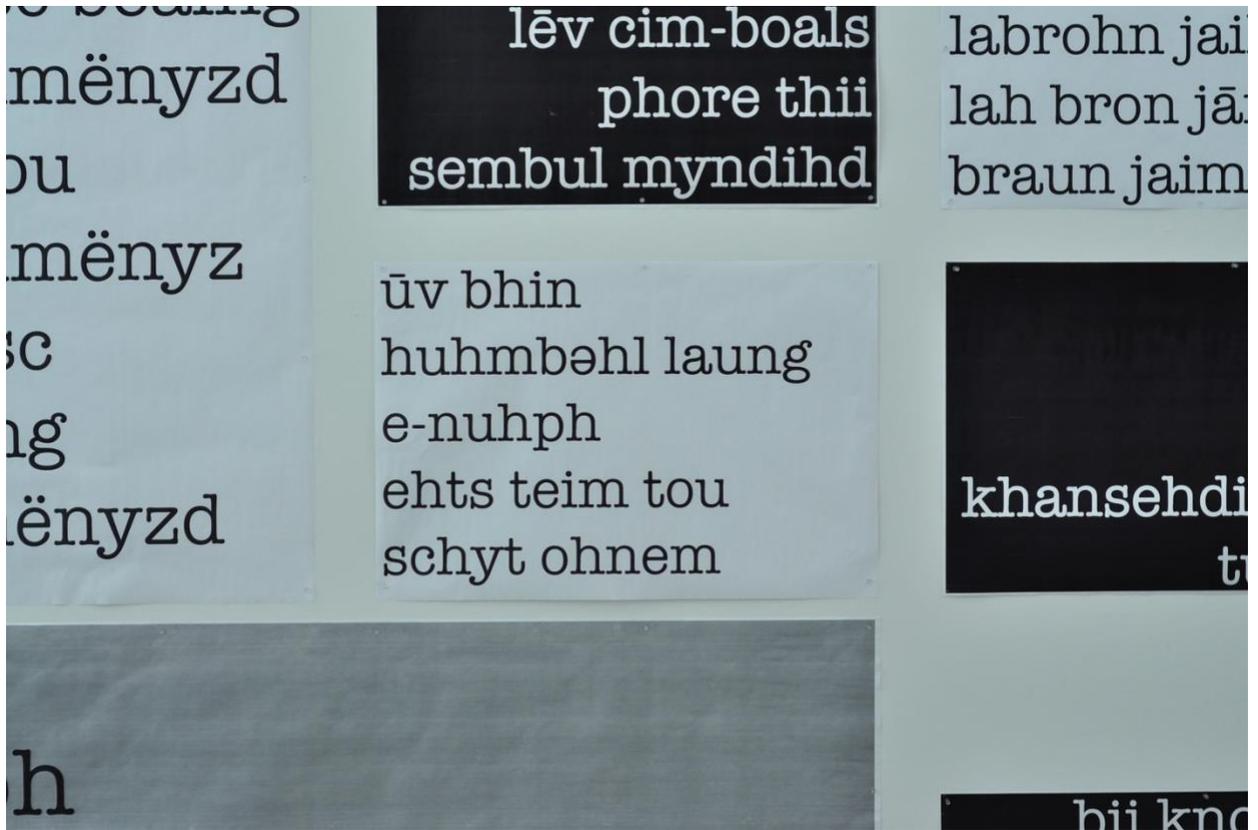


Figure 4, You've Been Humble Long Enough, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa



Figure 5, hi-fenetik Silkscreens, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa



Figure 6, tell the tough guys we're tougher than tough times, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa

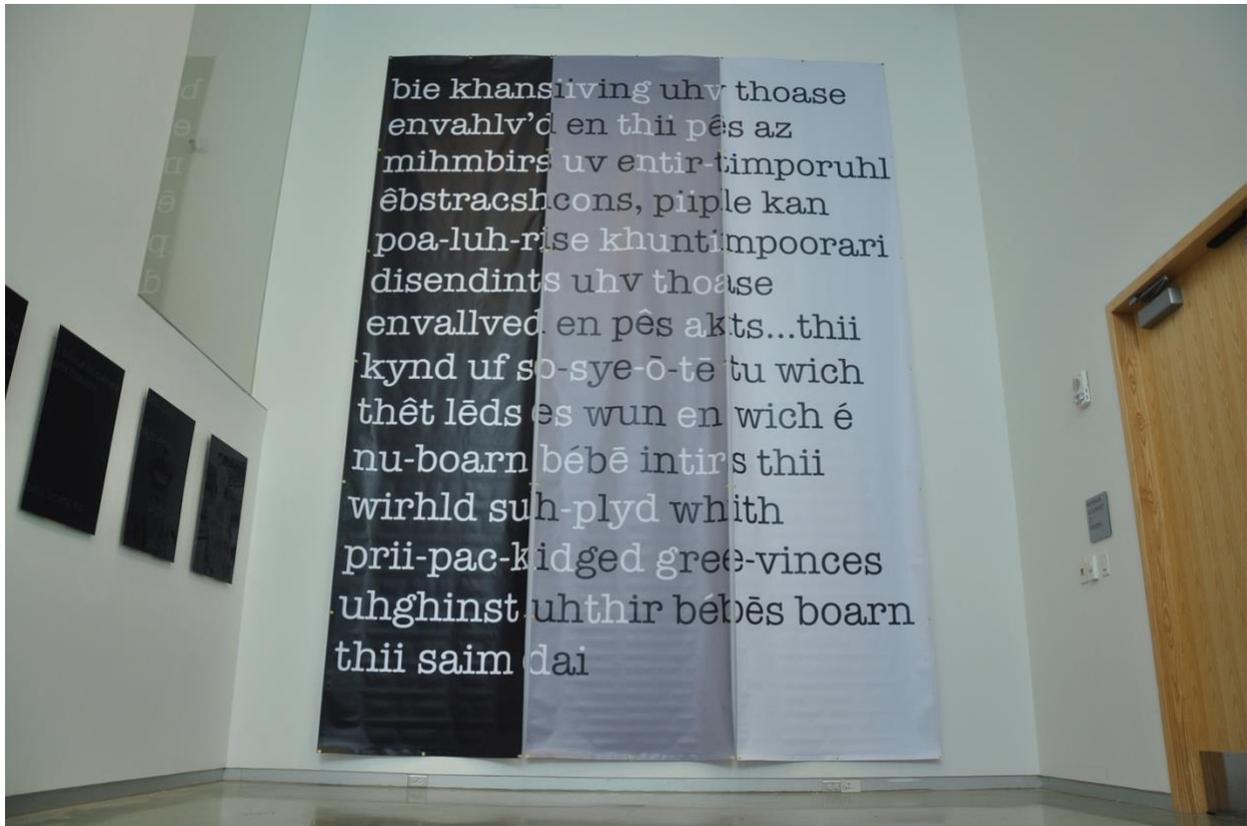


Figure 7, Prepackaged Grievances, E260 Gallery, University of Iowa