

# Letters

New works by Shelby Donnelly

The epistolary novel gained popularity in 18th-century Europe as a dramatic plot device through which stories unfold in a series of letters, diary entries, and the like. As a storytelling strategy it was useful in revealing a character's inner thoughts and opinions, or to lend a sense of authenticity to important plot details. Though less prevalent in modern literature, the genre is frequently rehashed in contemporary film and television as an alternative to character monologue. (Think *13 Reasons Why* or *Star Trek*)



The fabric collages presented in Shelby Donnelly's *Letters* stem from mail correspondences initiated by Donnelly to people with whom she's experienced various levels of intimacy. But unlike book chapters and T.V. episodes, Donnelly's individual works don't fit together to form one linear narrative, nor do they illustrate specific conversations. Instead, the sentiments relating to her original exchanges are pictorialized in a series of hand-embroidered fabric vignettes. The stiff, puppet-like characters depicted are seen conversing with each other or with themselves, within a theatrical tableau, acting out the anxieties arising from complicated relationships.

*Letters* emphasis on communication and companionship reminds us of the value of intimacy. In an increasingly *post-private* society, where everybody shares everything from the most banal to the intensely personal, it's important to ask how it has affected our ability to carry on real relationships. Are we less able to relate to one another, to self-reflect? Donnelly's collages represent an effort to preserve and reanimate private exchanges free from the market-driven public platforms that dominate our social lives.

Shelby Donnelly has exhibited both internationally and nationally, most recently at International House Philadelphia's Ibrahim Theater, The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and Haus der Kunst in Munich. Donnelly was the 2014 recipient of the Independence Foundation Artist Fellowship and traveled to Morocco to co-curate an exhibition at TALIM. Donnelly attended artist residencies at Millay Artist Colony in New York, the Cité de Internationale in Paris, Soaring Gardens, and Second State Press in Pennsylvania. She is a member of Tiger Strikes Asteroid, an artist-run gallery in Philadelphia. Donnelly holds a B.F.A in Printmaking and Drawing from Washington University in St. Louis (2002) and an M.F.A in Material Studies from Tyler School of Art, Temple University (2008). She lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.