

Am I just? Am I temperate? Am I brave?

Brian Groombridge, Susan Hobbs Gallery, February 11 – March 26, 2016

by Robert Fones



Brian Groombridge works with the industrial materials and finishes common to Minimalist sculpture, but his vocabulary of colours, use of graphic systems, and artistic interests, are derived from a wide range of disciplines, fields of study and historical periods. Many of his preoccupations hark back to the classical world of Archimedes and Pythagoras, mathematicians who solved geometrical problems while postulating philosophical ones. In his recent exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery Groombridge continues to explore the ideas he has worked with for several decades: the relationship between printed graphics and real materials; co-existing systems of scale; and the physical laws affecting objects.

Each of the seven works in the exhibition is titled *dd/mm/yyyy*, a standardized dating system commonplace on paper and online forms. Giving multiple works the same title evokes the Minimalist strategy of titling everything *Untitled* to avoid biasing the viewer's interpretation. However, Groombridge's common title conveys a particular association with time and its divisions. Each work in the exhibition appears to have some connection to this theme. As well Groombridge has incorporated elements from typography such as alignment, the use of an underlying grid and shapes that resemble letterforms.

All the works present a structure that must be interpreted by the viewer, as if one were scrutinizing the letters and words of an unfamiliar alphabet and trying to understand their meaning. One of the works in the show does have words in it, a quote from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The text is drawn using the grid that type designer, Erik Spiekermann, used to create one of his modular fonts. Groombridge doesn't display the text in

the finished font, but rather uses the grid upon which the font was built. The text, arranged flush left (in typographic terminology), reads:

“we become just
by performing
just actions,
temperate
by performing
temperate actions,
brave by
performing
brave actions.”



In its original context, the quote from Aristotle is preceded by two other examples of qualities demonstrated through actions: “men become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre.” Aristotle suggests that ethical qualities are only manifested in ethical actions in the same way that technical skill is only evident in the display of that skill. For Groombridge the equivalent of Aristotle’s ethical qualities is the grid, and the demonstration of his skill as an artist is evident in what he creates within that grid. The grid used by Spiekermann is not the same from letter to letter, nor is it based on a grid of equal-sized squares, but rather adapts to the unique form and width of each letter, sometimes wider, sometimes with more divisions. Similarly, Groombridge adapts his flexible grid to each work, or uses two grids within the same work. He does not generate typefaces but rather subjects many of his structures, graphic elements or composite shapes to the same rules that govern the treatment and organization of typographic elements.



One of the smallest works in the show is a tiny yellow plate with actual-size silhouette shapes of the five standard battery sizes—AAA, AA, C, D and 9V silk-screened on it. The battery shapes are arranged from smallest at the top to the rectangular 9V battery at the bottom. What does this work have to do with time or dates? Certainly, batteries have a life span; eventually they lose power and have to be replaced; most have a “Best Before” date; and everything that uses batteries only operates for a certain length of time.

The sequence of letters and numbers within the pale grey silhouette of each battery defines its size, number of cells, power output, etc. I had never thought about the standard sizes of batteries until I saw this work and was immediately reminded of the stone tablet or *Abaco* I had seen years ago embedded into the wall of the Torre del Popolo in Assisi. This plaque displayed standard roof tiles and bricks so that any manufactured materials would be consistent with this local standard. Similarly, batteries today must conform to standard dimensions, power output, and polarity in order to work inside all the devices that use them. Where is the battery standard maintained? How do manufacturers get access to it?

Groombridge provides no key to the meaning of the letters and numbers in this work. But you can look up battery codes on the internet to discover what some of these letters and numbers mean. For example, MN1500 defines the size of the AA battery. The batteries are therefore defined by their graphic templates of standard sizes as well as by a textual code of letters and numbers. The silhouettes are positioned flush left, like typographic elements, and the two or three lines of numbers and letters within each silhouette is also flush left, at times mirroring the irregular shape of the battery with its protruding terminal.

This five-battery template tablet appears mundane because everyone recognizes these familiar battery sizes. But like the stone standard from Assisi, this yellow chart will become an historical and cultural marker as batteries change size or become obsolete. These templates are like Platonic forms. The real batteries are out in the world, powering keyboards, computer mice, alarm clocks, flashlights and a million other devices used in our battery dependent society. All of these devices die when their battery life expires. Hence, these battery templates are like genetic codes with their preordained lifespans embedded within their numbers and letters.



Another work that is similarly printed on an aluminum plate is an interesting companion to this piece insofar as it includes three red shapes that are of a kind. These shapes are like elongated letter O's with straight parallel sides and elliptical ends. They are attached to parallel red lines so they also look like the bowls of lowercase b's or the bubbles in a carpenter's level. These lines and shapes are parallel to the top of the plate they are printed on but because the plate is tilted, these graphics are also tilted. The plate hangs from a hole in one corner, a strategy Groombridge has used in the past to allow an object to reveal its own centre of gravity. (Does this make an object *just*, or true to its own nature, in the Aristotelian sense?) The hanging hole is centered in the top left corner of the plate so the bottom right corner is

directly beneath it with equal mass on both sides of this vertical axis.

These elongated O's are unique in size, proportion and position but because all the graphics have the same $\frac{1}{4}$ " stroke thickness, it is difficult to reconcile their differences in scale and proportion and their possible orientation in pictorial space. It could be conjectured that the elongated O's shifted position when the plate tilted into its current position in order to maintain visual balance. Groombridge thereby creates a conflict between the real equilibrium of the panel and the graphic equilibrium of the red shapes.

Another wall-mounted work has a comparable grouping of graphic shapes. This work consists of a framed white metal panel on which are eleven silk-screened squares, each composed of one yellow and one grey-blue right-angled triangle. These diagonally divided squares are reminiscent of the nautical semaphore flag that represents the letter O. A grid of nine of these squares or flags forms a larger composite square at the bottom right. There is an empty space above this that is equal to the height of each square and then two more squares above this lower grid. The empty row suggests an incomplete formation, as if some squares had been removed from the grid. Did Groombridge remove this row to emphasize that the underlying grid exists whether it is filled with squares or not?



This work contains two different systems of measurement: the grid of printed squares and the grid of regularly spaced screws around the edges of the white panel. The two systems coexist but are not congruent. More squares could fit within the available space of the panel but the margins would then be unequal. If even more squares were added, they would be cut off by the edge of the panel. Perhaps it was this work's location in the office area of the gallery that made me think of a calendar with its monthly grid of days. The yellow and grey-blue diagonally divided squares suggest the days near the end of the month that are often divided diagonally to accommodate two numbers that share the same space. The two large composite shapes suggest a section of a calendar that has been isolated from the whole and framed independently. Groombridge has carefully aligned this grid of graphic shapes with the bottom right corner of the panel but then has allowed this grid to go out of alignment with the secondary grid of evenly spaced screws. As a result, he deliberately creates a visual and conceptual conflict through the incongruence between the graphic elements and the material construction.



A similar conflict is found in a free-standing work in which a painted metal stand supports a white high-density L-shaped plastic slab that only partially fills the entire top. This work's similarity to a table brings up questions of why its top is incomplete. Is Groombridge setting up a relationship between the linear characteristic of the metal bar of the stand and the planar nature of the white plastic? Between the voids within the sculpture and the mass that is occupied by physical material? If the missing section of top were the same cubic mass as the stand, then there would be a simple answer. But it isn't and Groombridge isn't interested in such literal equivalencies.

The orange colour of the metal stand is reminiscent of tools and various devices that are used in surveying and measuring: tape measures, theodolites, even the orange ribbon

attached by surveyors to wooden stakes. This high-density white plastic suggests cutting boards and countertops. This association would make sense if the whole top was intact. More likely the white L-shaped form is the equivalent of a carpenter's square—a tool that recurs repeatedly in Groombridge's work. Theoretically such an object could have been used to measure the metal sections of which the stand is constructed. The white L-shaped form's length could measure the width of the stand and by deducting inches using its one-inch thickness, shorter units could be measured. Its irregular side lengths of 5, 6, 8 and 18 inches could similarly be used through addition or subtraction to measure other lengths. So the white form is a standard or tool that could have been used to measure all the parts of the stand. As such, it is a kind of key to the stand, in a different material and configuration.



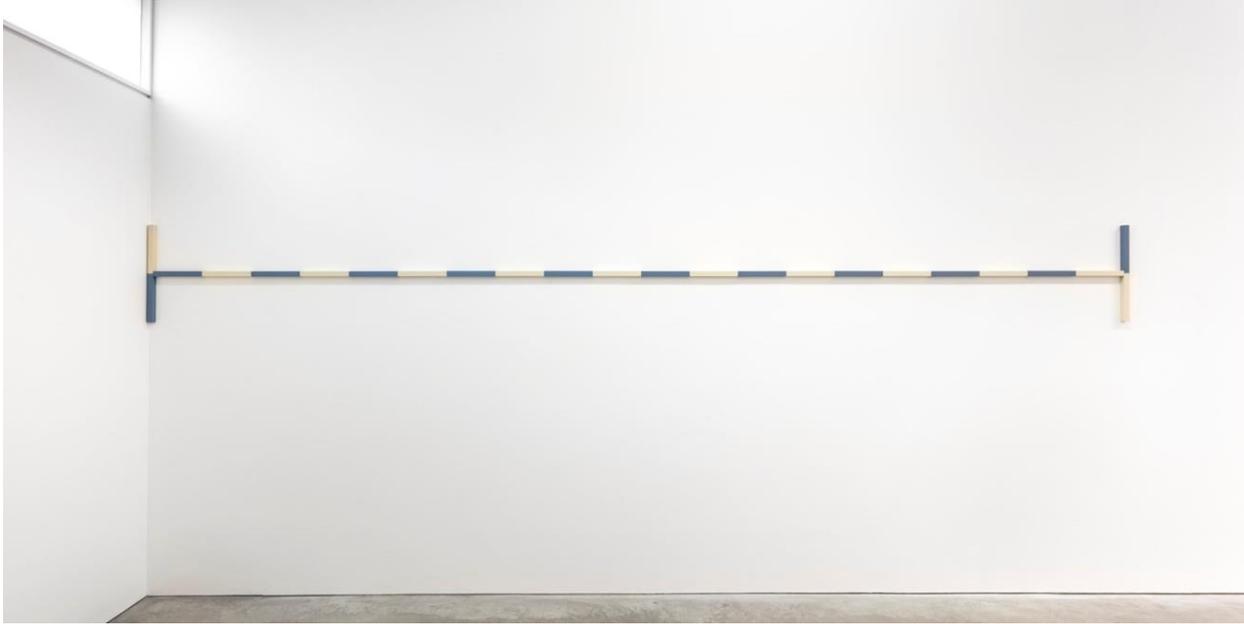
Another work in the show is physically almost a reversal of the structure of the orange and white piece. It consists of a solid yellow plinth supporting a white right-angled object, once again similar to a carpenter's square, with a smaller white object near it. Both objects are made from the same aluminum T-bar. The smaller object sits in the corner of the top. The right-angled object clings mysteriously to the top and side. Since its vertical part is much longer and heavier than its horizontal part why doesn't it just slide off the plinth? What holds it in place? Its centre of mass is located outside its own physical body and somewhere within the yellow plinth. Gravity is acting on this centre of mass; so it just stays there as if held by magnetism.

Both white objects demonstrate characteristics of this plinth and most other gallery plinths: it has straight edges and sides that are at right angles to each other. Similar tools would have been used to make it. Although the plinth is a traditional form for displaying sculpture, in this case, it is an integral part of the sculpture, signalled by its tool-like colour and by its role in keeping the objects in place and in a specific relationship to each other. The yellow colour is so evocative of Dewalt power tools that this sculpture reads like a work in progress, as if someone had set down their tools temporarily while they went to have coffee or lunch.

The last work in the show is like a three-dimensional version of the graphic device used by architects and machinists to indicate a fixed length: a horizontal line with short vertical lines at each end. It consists of twelve units, made of one-inch square aluminum bar, each unit painted half cream and half blue so twenty-four sections in all. Twenty units define its horizontal length while two units form right-angled T's at each end. The work extends out horizontally from the north-west corner of the gallery at approximately eye level. It's orientation against this corner suggests the beginning of a sequence of measurements that could be repeated along the wall.

Like a 19th century surveyor's chain, this piece is a specific length and is subdivided into smaller units. Each element of this work is 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " long—not a known standard—no doubt Groombridge's own. The cream colour

may be a practicality to make these sections stand out against the white wall of the gallery but the cream and blue together evoked, for me, Josiah Wedgwood's Creamware and Jasperware, as if this measuring device had its origin in the 1700s. Groombridge's inspirations often come from other fields of study or historical periods so such a Romantic association, while perhaps not intended, would not be out of character.



As an object it is similar to the crossbar structure that holds the vertical legs in place on the orange stand in another work in the show. It also resembles the *ranging poles* used by surveyors that are similarly divided into equal sections. It even suggests the swinging barriers that block parking lot entrances. Groombridge has reversed the polarity of the blue and cream units at each end of the horizontal bar to give the work a specific orientation in space: blue on top on the right and cream on top on the left. It also has blue on the left of the horizontal bar and cream on the right. As such it can't be flipped because the colours on the bar would then be reversed. Hence it has an absolute size and an absolute orientation. The irony is that the units are not standardized so there is no way of knowing what its absolute size is. It floats on the wall, smug in its self-sufficiency.

Groombridge frequently uses elements that resemble tools from carpentry and surveying, and graphic devices from nautical signalling and typography. In his work, as in these other disciplines, there is work to be done and messages to be received but the work and the reading is to a great extent, up to the viewer. Groombridge sets up constructions that demonstrate odd effects of gravity, peculiarities of scale, irregularities in seemingly standardized systems, and messages that can be read in a number of ways. He is deliberate and precise in how he formulates these constructions. His work is temperate and just. The viewer must be brave in venturing beyond the blue and cream gateway to that Pythagorean highway that leads to unknown territory.

A condensed version of this essay appears on thisistomorrow.info.