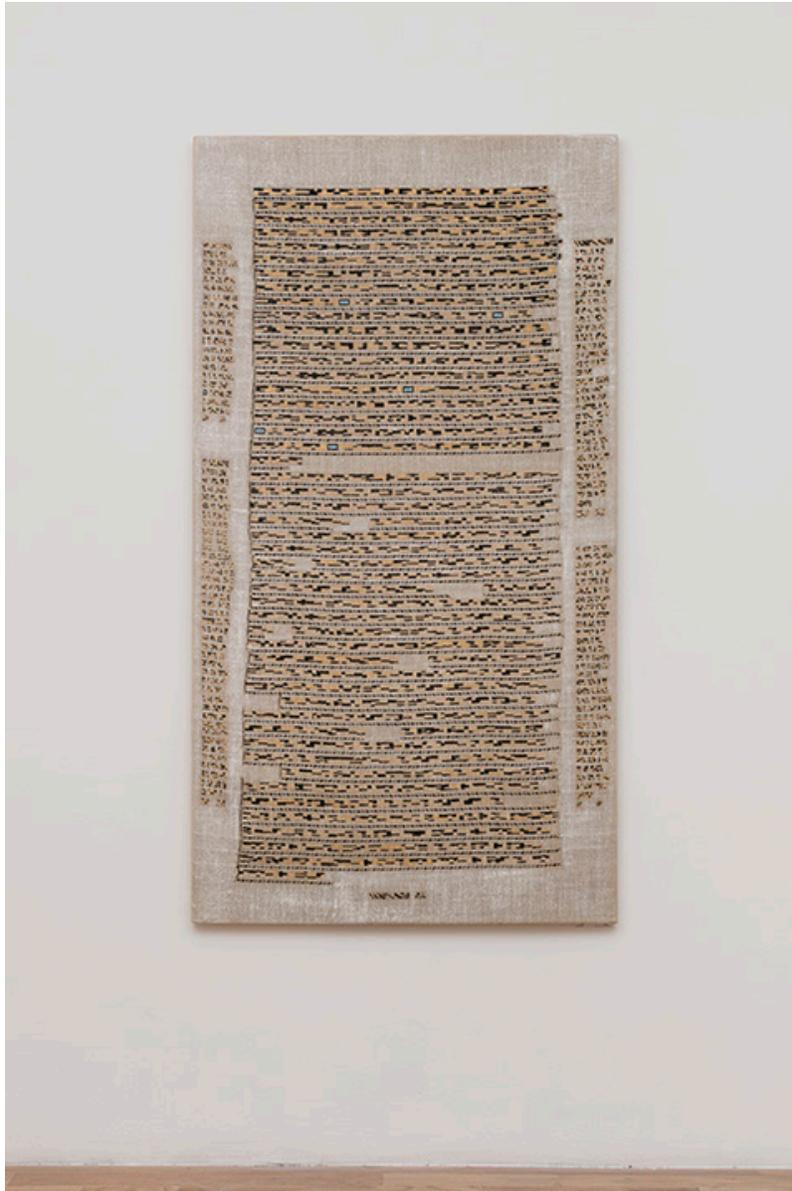


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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By Jason Farago, Will Heinrich, Martha Schwendener and Jillian Steinhauer



"Babel 2" (1980), one of Beryl Korot's hand-woven canvases in "A Coded Language."
Credit Emile Askey/bitforms gallery, New York

Beryl Korot had a breakthrough in the 1970s. While working in print, video and weaving, she realized that all these mediums encode information in lines. This inspired an interest in "how lines could be built up to create information," she said in a video for Art 21. In 1980, she started weaving her own canvases and devising a coded language based on their structure. It uses squares on a grid to symbolize the letters of the English alphabet. A key to it opens her new exhibition, "A Coded Language," at the gallery Bitforms. The key is legible but not readily comprehensible. It intimates that language can have meaning even when it's not understood.

On her first hand-woven canvases, “Babel 1” and “Babel 2” (both 1980), Ms. Korot has painted the biblical story of the Tower of Babel in her code. The thin red-and-black characters of “Babel 1” look as if they belong to a non-Western language, while the symbols in “Babel 2” are more rectangular and blocky, like Morse code. Both are in rows contained in columns (or towers), suggesting a form that connects all written communication, despite the dispersion that concludes the Babel story.

The paintings “Anordnung: Clearly Visible/Strongly Sewn” (1985) and “A = Girl” (1986) recall ancient pages of Scripture, with a calligraphic version of Ms. Korot’s language and weathered surfaces layered with marks. Each contains the silhouette of a girl derived from a photograph of Jews on train tracks during the Holocaust. The child seems to be a time traveler roaming the canvases in search of answers.

In the video “Etty” (2009-10), snippets of text from the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish writer who died at Auschwitz, scroll over a lattice pattern and images of storms. Hillesum created her own code to circumvent the Nazis, so while her words are intelligible, they also have a missing, second meaning. “We are permitted to send telegrams but forbidden to be specific,” she writes — an eerie precedent for Ms. Korot’s work.

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