



# ELIZABETH ATTERBURY: BONES, GLYPHS, AND TWISTS OF FATE

*An interview with Elizabeth Atterbury by Kate McQuillen  
Photography by Wingate Studios*

*The glyphs in Elizabeth Atterbury's recent series of monoprints, produced at Wingate Studios, are like a personal alphabet. The artist moves between sculpture and print by cutting symbol-like shapes from copper, arranging them in a form on the press bed, and embossing them into paper with chine-collé. Each of these symbols is like a shorthand image, referencing an object, an idea, or a family member.*

In Elizabeth's process, these objects go through a number of transformations. Each begins as a representation of a thing; then its meaning is specified to symbolize a person or idea; then each one combines with other object-glyphs to create a sort of family portrait. As viewers we ask, "Who are these people? How are they linked through time and space? What parts of their shared history are relevant now?"

The story begins with Atterbury's maternal great-great-grandfather, who was also a person of letters, in his own art and through the circumstances of his life. He was a philologist, scholar, and calligrapher who lived in China during the Qing Dynasty, and studied ancient bronze inscriptions. At some point, he fell ill, and someone brought him medicine in the form of bones. On these bones he noticed carved glyphs, which he recognized to be significant. These were later understood to be the first discovered Oracle Bones. These bones (usually the shoulder blades of oxen or the flat part of a turtle shell) were used in divining practices during the late Shang Dynasty. Diviners would carve questions

about their fate onto these surfaces and submit them to the dieties; then the bones would be put under stressors such as fire or pressure to produce cracks and fissures. The diviner would interpret the cracks to predict the future.

That discovery would be enough excitement for one lifetime, but the tale doesn't end there. Atterbury's grandfather's fate took a turn during the Boxer Rebellion, when he was assigned a military post. As a scholar and a poet, he felt unfit to lead in that role, and in an act of sacrifice, took his own life. For Atterbury, the circumstances of this story are hazy, unclear, and in many ways, just that: a story.

Atterbury uses this tale as a starting point to chronicle the path her family took after these critical events over a century ago. Life continued on, and they found their way to West Palm Beach, Florida. Though her grandfather's story was foggy, it quietly shaped the interactions of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons for years to come, passing along through objects and personal interactions.

The insistence in Atterbury's work on carvings in surfaces, embedded symbols, and object reproduction make these works feel like evidence. They are solid ways to capture and reiterate her family member's links through time, and the circumstances that brought them to the present day. It's a family history learned through intimate moments and shared possessions, rather than structured rituals, written histories, and family trees. It's a history like that of many American families, rooted in assimilation and biculturalism.

Where Atterbury's work makes a significant turn towards the present-day is in the objects she selects to represent herself. As a working mother and an artist, her role in this storyline feels like a significant marker, a leap into the 21st Century. As one way to depict her own presence, for instance, Atterbury has morphed the shape of a breast milk bag tab into a stylized glyph, cleverly merging this thoroughly modern item into a story with ties to something as far away as ancient divination rituals. By adding her contemporary symbol-shape to the alphabet, she inserts her unique character into this story.

In her monoprints, Atterbury plays with time, acknowledging it as the fluid medium that links these generations. She occasionally uses diptychs as a way to separate the past and the future, with rhythmic patterns that span across both images. Time becomes both warped and flattened, creating an odd spatial sense where shapes float, tuck, and fold around each other. Eras fall together in these images, creating embossed snapshots of the twists and turns of history, merged by the printing press. •

Selected prints from Atterbury's latest series, produced at Wingate Studios, will be on view at her upcoming show at Mrs. Gallery in Queens, NYC, from November 17, 2018 – January 19, 2019.

*(images) Elizabeth Atterbury, River Poems, warm white stonehenge, Wingate Studio 2018*



