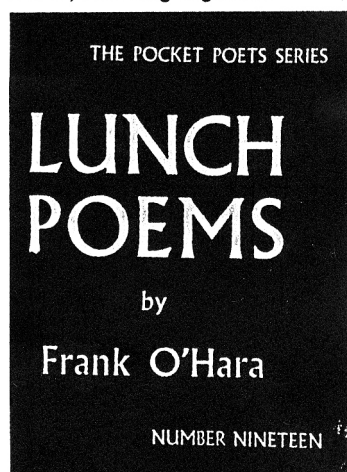


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Steve Wolfe: *Untitled (Study for Lunch Poems)*, 1990, acrylic, oil, silkscreen on board, 7 by 4 1/4 inches; at Luhring Augustine.



## Steve Wolfe at Luhring Augustine

Few possessions are more revealing of their owner's personality, preferences and self-image than books. In providing us glimpses of his personal library, Steve Wolfe offers a self-portrait of sorts. Painted on board in combinations of acrylic, oil, modeling paste and various printing techniques, the life-size book cover paintings in this show are studies for Wolfe's three-dimensional book sculptures (also life-size). Depicting the top layer of books crammed into a cardboard box, some of the paintings are a patchwork of scrupulously reproduced book covers and spines confined within a rectangular space.

There is a cheerful randomness to the arrangements as volumes of French poetry, Beat literature and naturalist bird guides end up as unlikely mates.

The self-portrait Wolfe offers is one of the artist as an aspiring esthete. In addition to French poetry, there is a heavy concentration on 19th-century Romantic novels and American pop and literary culture as personified by Montgomery Clift, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal and William Burroughs. The occasional introduction of a more idiosyncratic volume, such as a Tintin comic book, suggests a more personal taste.

Transformed into geometric paintings, the book covers become abstract forms. This

seems appropriate as one begins to notice, via Wolfe's choices, how much 20th-century painting has influenced book cover design. For instance, a Frank Stella-like composition adorns a Raymond Carver novel while Jasper Johns's *Flag* forms the center of a book devoted to contemporary American poetry. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* appears with a constructivist motif while Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* are presented with an Albers-like composition.

In a smaller room, a series of paintings replicated Wolfe's collection of LP and 45 records, again realized at life size with loving verisimilitude. Records, even more than books, provide a kind of carbon dating; Wolfe's offer a slice of life from the '60s and '70s with recording stars such as the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Otis Redding, Bobbie Gentry and Patti Smith. Because the vinyl disks are less varied and interesting visually than the books, they operate primarily as nostalgia triggers.

The appeal of Wolfe's work operates on two levels. From an esthetic point of view, his found abstractions have a certain decorative charm. But for most viewers, particularly those close in age to the artist (who was born in 1955), the larger appeal is undoubtedly more personal. Wolfe depicts books, and even specific paperback editions, which were shared by a generation. They represent half-forgotten dreams and ideals, conjure literary memories and bring back the long struggle to establish one's intellectual identity. They remind us of the dramatic extent to which we are what we read.

—Eleanor Heartney