

Chicago's finest

23 people who made significant contributions to the arts in 1998

Nancy DREW

Courtesy Kay Rosen

Kay Rosen's "Nancy Drew": Trained as a linguist, she knows how we perceive words in visual art better than most of her colleagues.

exhibition here, at the old Moming Dance Center, as well as her first museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art. And during the next 21 years, she enjoyed six important solo exhibitions in Chicago, the most recent just months ago at the Ten in One Gallery.

That show presented all-new paintings and drawings, which was perhaps a sign of commitment to a Chicago audience, for Rosen also was preparing for the biggest exhibition of her career, a 25-year retrospective — of more than 50 pieces — jointly organized by the Otis College of Art and Design and Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Such recognition would be a boost for any artist, but for Rosen it perhaps counts just that little bit more, as her conceptually based work remains challenging to many viewers, being made entirely of painted or drawn words.

Unlike other contemporaries who use text, however, Rosen trained as a linguist and knows how we perceive words in visual art better than most of her col-

leagues. This has allowed a directness and playfulness unusual in work of our day, although despite such immediacy, it never is unclear that Rosen is a complex artist.

The high degree of her seriousness comes out in a what-you-see-is-what-you-get aesthetic that expresses everything in purely visual terms — through color, placement, type font and spelling.

Sometimes you have to sound out the text to catch wry twists in meaning, but all data necessary for deciphering a work is plainly visible on each surface.

This is not at all easy, though Rosen's art remains easygoing. There's nothing schoolmarmish or dictatorial about it. But neither is it buttoned-down or tight-lipped.

It's a good year whenever a major museum exhibition increases the possibility of seeing art as sharp as Rosen's. The L.A. show, continuing through Feb. 14, acknowledges a body of work that has been at once personal, daring and life-affirming.

Alan G. Artner



Artist as wordsmith

As the French always claim great Belgian artists as their own, so do Chicagoans claim Kay Rosen.

After all, the Texas-born resident of Gary had her first group