"These Carnations Defy Language," a two-person exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, is a perfect pairing of local artists Alexandra Grant and Steve Roden.

Both have long been inspired by language, often using it to generate colorful, intensely heartfelt abstractions. Side by side in this gently moving show, their drawings and collages have something of a familial resemblance, deploying dense networks of grids, stripes and triangles with vibrant, organic energy.

The exhibition was inspired by both artists' engagement with the prose poems of French writer Francis Ponge, who described everyday things like flowers, wasps and soap with unbridled jubilation. Still, despite these raptures (or because of them), he found language inadequate: The exhibition's truculent title comes from him.
Grant's and Roden's works might be said to reverse-engineer Ponge: Where he attempted to capture quotidian wonders in words, they transform language into images that blossom.

Roden often uses textual or musical sources as a kind of "score" for generating imagery, and here he uses an issue of the Italian architecture magazine Domus published in the month and year of his birth.

The resulting drawings and collages often incorporate clippings from the magazine and refer obliquely to the sleek contours of modern architecture, although Roden builds his images through accretion and improvisation, which gives them a more relaxed, vernacular feel.

"The sky crying is," features triangular, peek-a-boo cutouts that reveal spare, architectural imagery behind a surface of drippy, hand-painted, multicolored stripes. The image simultaneously evokes structure and defies it.

Especially intriguing is the video "lines and faces," in which Roden arranges striped paper triangles over a magazine page depicting three famous writers. As Roden aligns and misaligns the stripes over the portraits, we understand the irreducibility of faces: They are always more than the sum of the lines—whether drawn or written—that describe them.

Grant was inspired by Sophocles' play "Antigone," whose female protagonist defies political decrees to honor her dead brother. Five large wall pieces are each titled with a line from the play, "I was born to love not to hate."

Strong stripes and chevrons provide a structural component that plays against the messiness of Rorschach blots and the words of the title in Grant's trademark mirrored writing. The blots and the words—both bilaterally symmetrical like a body—flicker between legibility and nonsense.

The juxtaposition of hard, geometric shapes and this more indeterminate imagery is an analog, not only for Antigone's predicament, but for the way text works. Only hard, black letters on a page, it can evoke, as Ponge knew, so much more.

What Roden and Grant are really getting at is meaning itself: how it is made and transmitted and what becomes of it along the way.

Seeing their works together for the first time, I was surprised by their visionary, almost spiritual quality. Although they appear systematic and structured, there is always a human element that escapes description, defies our attempts to pin it down.