

TEMPLON



IVAN NAVARRO

THE NEW YORK TIMES, May 25, 2026

The Visual Artists Who Use Crosswords as Their Canvas

Whether used to explore aesthetics, provocation or memory, the black-and-white puzzle grid is anything but square.

By Julia Carpenter

May 25, 2026

Every evening, after he has put his kids to bed and walked out back to his garden studio, Matlok Griffiths sits down with a stack of crosswords. The 43-year-old artist, based in Melbourne, Australia, said that over the last 10 years, he has come to depend on this daily ritual. It anchors his routine.

But Mr. Griffiths isn't solving the crosswords — he's painting over ones that have been completed by his parents, friends or strangers. Over the last decade, he has filled dozens of sketchbooks with these unusual puzzle paintings. He dabs some with abstract splotches of color, others with earth tones. Sometimes the newsprint numbers on the crossword squares peek through, asking viewers to take a closer look. Other times he'll leave the black and white squares entirely exposed.

Mr. Griffith's mailbox is always stuffed with new submissions, which he then pastes onto paper, preparing them for artistic transformation. Each daily work is titled after a clue in that day's crossword: "Untitled (Frolicsome)," "Untitled (establish as valid)" or even "Untitled (mother taking boy to the United Nations?)."

"The language in the clue definitely informs the formal outcome of the painting, but it's not like I'm going to illustrate a 'mother taking a boy to the United Nations,' but the viewer will load that onto the abstract painting," he said. "The best ones are the ones that just flow. They become quite unruly and work against the grid and sometimes spill outside the box."

Mr. Griffiths said he sees the crossword as a medium as much as an inspiration. For him, the grid, color and clues can inform his approach to the artwork.

“The best art is entirely up for interpretation, like life, right?” he said. “There’s multiple answers and multiple truths. So maybe I’m solving it with some emotional answer.”

With his crossword series, Mr. Griffiths joins an interesting tradition: that of visual artists drawing inspiration from the [century-old](#) black-and-white puzzle. The crossword holds a special appeal to these creatives, some of whom use it as a visual symbol or an artistic medium — or even both.

Sometimes the artist supplies the answers as part of the work; in 1966, [Nancy Holt filled in her own “Crossword Work,”](#) challenging viewers to judge her own answers. At other times, artists like Mr. Griffiths take paint, pen or other media to render the crossword completely unsolvable. Vanessa Wilkes’s [“Time After Time” series](#), for example, superimposes Dalmatians, swans and teapots over half-finished puzzles. And then, of course, there are some viewers who interpret these artworks as open invitations to play; in 2016, officials at the Neues Museum in Nuremberg, Germany, [were horrified to find a 91-year-old visitor](#) solving Arthur Koepcke’s “Reading Work Piece” with her own ballpoint pen.

The Power of the Grid

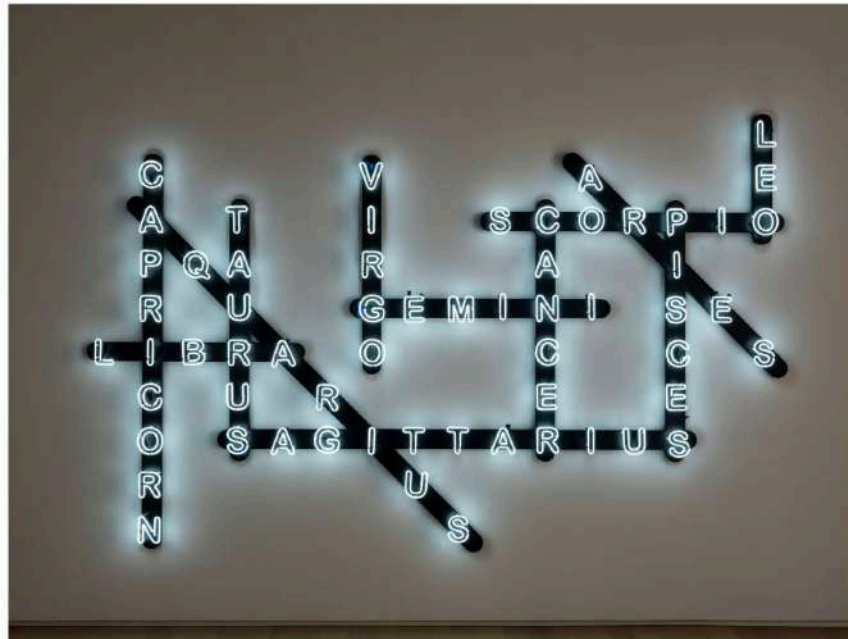
The simplicity of the crossword grid appealed to Mr. Griffiths because of his background in art history. [In the early days of the Cubist movement](#), artists like Picasso and Mondrian experimented with the form of the grid. Landscape painters and portraitists have traditionally used these same squares to size, sketch and block their compositions. In 1979, the [art critic Rosalind Krauss](#) argued the rise of the grid represented a turning point for modern painting.

So when Mr. Griffiths first began experimenting with the crossword puzzle in his art, he appreciated the “formal structure” its grid provided him.

“The grid has dominated the last 100 years of painting, I would argue, and I’m not the first to argue it,” Mr. Griffiths said. “I saw the grid and I was like, ‘Oh, cool, this thing is already structured.’”

Iván Navarro, a 53-year-old visual artist from Chile, has sculpted crossword-like connections of words in neon lights and rectangular infinity mirrors. He said he’s especially inspired by the “geometric forms” hidden within a partially solved puzzle.

“You’re playing with shapes, not just with language,” he said. “The whole thing becomes an image, not just trying to come out with a narrative.”



Iván Navarro's sculptures include materials such as neon light, aluminum and electric energy. "The Milky Way" and other works have been inspired by the "geometric forms" hidden within a partially solved puzzle. Courtesy of Galerie Tenspan; Photo by Charles Roussel

Mr. Navarro said he was inspired by every step of the solving process, from the arrangement of the squares to the different ways a person might fill in the crossword and “even the font you use when you write a word.”

Crossword puzzle construction is itself an art form, one where a maker must pay attention to cluing and [word lists](#) in addition to the arrangement of black squares. Robert Logan, a 62-year-old constructor, finds a puzzle built on a creative grid design to be a particularly satisfying challenge. Because he crafts mostly themeless puzzles, he enjoys experimenting with different shapes and styles of grid aesthetic. [One 2023 puzzle](#) resembles the open bloom of a flower; squinting at another reveals [a subtle swirl](#) hidden amid the white squares.

Now that he’s retired and living in Central America, Mr. Logan also practices stone carving, out of which he crafts abstract sculptures. Crossword constructing is a “shared” creative outlet, he said, in part because of his focus on grid aesthetics.

“The first chance I have to create a positive response in the solvers’ experience is when they look at the puzzle,” he said. “The first second of looking at the puzzle, they’re going to see the arrangement of the black squares. And I thought to myself, ‘That’s a missed opportunity for a lot of constructors.’”

The Joy of Play

Artists may also — subconsciously or consciously — be drawn to the crossword for another reason, said Robbie Kubala, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin who has [researched the aesthetic value of crossword puzzles](#).

Crosswords, like all games, carry an inherent invitation to play. By incorporating the puzzle into their work, visual artists may be tapping into that feeling.

“Artists can harness the inherent allure and enticement, and use that as a way to draw their own viewers and appreciators into their work,” Mr. Kubala said. “The crossword demands to be filled in, so it demands my attention.”

In the works of Ms. Holt and the contemporary artist Cameron Granger, the crosswords appeared filled in, almost daring a viewer to double-check the answers. By provoking audiences to review the puzzle and imagine inserting their own entries, these artists create a more lingering aesthetic experience.

“It invites you in,” Mr. Kubala said. “And of course you want to solve the thing. You walk by and read the clue, and there are so many artistic possibilities in the blank or the partially completed grid as well.”

Mr. Navarro often asks viewers to solve the puzzles embedded in his work. His [2007 installation “¿Dónde Están?”](#) was inspired by a different game — the word search. In the piece, Mr. Navarro invited viewers to search a painted floor with a flashlight. As light swept the floor, illuminated letters revealed a hidden series of names of people who had supported the Chilean dictatorship. He intentionally chose to highlight those who had yet to face charges or consequences for their actions. In revealing these names, Mr. Navarro asked participants to contemplate the title of his piece. Where were these people now? Had they been brought to justice?

The Allure of Nostalgia

People across cultures have a special relationship with the crossword. The very image of the puzzle can evoke associations with leisure time, childhood and family.

“Crosswords for many people embody this connection to their place,” Mr. Kubala said.

In [his 2024 series, “Movements,”](#) Mr. Granger created crosswords that spoke to his relationship with his grandmother, who liked to solve puzzles in the kitchen. “It looked like some ‘National Treasure’-type of decoding going on,” [he wrote of the memory](#).

Ms. Wilkes created her “Time After Time” series from a similar place of memory. She remembered visiting an ex-boyfriend’s family lake house and bonding with his relatives over big books of puzzles. After the breakup, she felt inspired to revisit the crossword in her art, this time appreciating it as a thematic tie for the series.

“So much of my work touches on themes from childhood and things like that, and I can’t shut up about this theme of nostalgia,” she said. “The past always feels more romantic than the present. There are a limited number of what-if’s.”

When she painted two other pieces in the series, “Over and Over” and “Again and Again,” Ms. Wilkes made a deliberate decision. She didn’t want viewers to be able to “play” the crossword in her work. Instead, she painted images over the clues, leaving some letters filled in so as to tantalize audiences with the puzzle’s inability to be solved.

“You can’t participate in the past,” she said. “You’re always slightly outside of it, thinking about what could have been — or at least I am.”