

When Good Writing Goes Wrong

Francesca Gavin

What happens when words go wrong? Or rather face the wrong direction, forming a mirror image of the way they should logically be facing? This reverse of the 'natural order' is something central in Samuel Jablon's text paintings. In fact, Jablon not only depicts words backwards, but he also fragments and pulls them apart, layers them and plays with their meaning.

Jablon follows in the footsteps of a number of artists known for mirror writing, notably Leonardo da Vinci, who used the technique as a simple code for his comments in his notebooks. The technique was also popular with Ottoman calligraphers, for whom it had mystical connotations. In more recent years, Christopher Wool split apart words in his text pieces, adding a staccato syncopation to their enunciation and consumption. Mirror writing is an element of humorous wordplay in Bruce Nauman's neon works and works on paper. Jablon, however, fuses these approaches with a different aesthetic and intention.

His phrases and words consciously shift and change rhythm and pacing. One current influence is the Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov, whose poems have a terse brevity that forms a fitting comparison to Jablon's short phrases and single words. Other inspirations include the poems and lyrics of the sci-futurist Sun Ra, and Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. However, the position of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time* also is an interesting comparison to Jablon's painting. "Time is necessary to man, so that, made flesh, he may be able to realise himself as a personality. I am not thinking of linear time, meaning the possibility of getting something done, performing some action. The action is a result, and what I am considering is the cause which makes man incarnate in a moral sense," Tarkovsky wrote in 1985. "It is obvious enough that without Time, memory cannot exist either. But memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us." There is a sense of emotional record in Jablon's work and his sense of repetition. He brings attention to an incomprehensible endlessness.

Jablon has noted that the mirror writing and deconstructed words are a way to slow the viewer down. The issue of time is something fundamentally part of his practice. Text is something so easily consumed and understood, and the artist intentionally upsets that norm. It also forces viewers to engage with the image itself longer. His current body of work was made during lockdown in New York during the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting a shift in experience. The paintings become a metaphor for that loss and change. Jablon is trying to slow us down, to show the representation of experience of slowed down time. The paintings

become what they are representing, in a similar way onomatopoeic words intimate and suggest the sounds they are describing.

The textured nature of Jablon's approach to text is also notable here. His approach to letterforms resists the conformity and legibility of text in the modern age. Instead of the clear font of the screen-scape, he presents the hand-made word, filled with symbolism and emotion. Bo-Won Keum in her essay "On the Letterform of the Age" (2021), highlights how the Bauhaus's fascination with industrialized text uniformity "prefigured current discussions about the form and function of design in the digital age, and the need for typography to adapt to various surfaces, formats, and operating systems." Jablon's letters are scratchy, textured, skinny, fat, scrawled, lumpy or bumpy. Even if he attempts to recreate a composition, the results are always unique.

The style of his approach also echoes the meaning. It resembles the typographical experiments of concrete poets, for whom the form of the words on a page echoed the meaning of the text. Jablon's expletives and words of despair are not always negative. Perhaps like tarot cards which, when revealed upside down, have the opposite meaning of the depicted image, Jablon's backwards 'Fuck,' 'Chaos,' or 'Doomed' do not always feel pessimistic. The color and energy of his approach also flips fear and despair on its head, perhaps even to joy or humour. They are intentionally positive. Yet there is something ironic here. A wry send up of the lie of positivity, the ever hopeful smile in the wake of constant chaos — one of the most repeated words in his current body of paintings.

Color is undeniably a part of how that optimism and pessimism seesaw functions in the paintings. Jablon is fascinated with how the change of tone and emphasis of color transforms the meaning, reaction to a work. The text itself shifts. His words are getting thinner, covering the canvas. The layers of color beneath and around his words are beginning to become less abstract, almost resembling waves of flames. The process of making work is beginning to slow as the layers increase. Scale of the works is increasing — partly due to access to unused stretchers sourced from the studio of the late Joyce Pensato after her death, some stained with her fingerprints.

There is an anxiety in Jablon's words, but it feels more something expelled than perpetuated. His words, such as 'fuck,' are constantly repainted, in varied palettes, an exploration on how color changes understanding. These words capture the politics and atmosphere of the now without specifics. 'Fuck' is an expletive that was outlawed in print in the 19th century, notably by the Obscene Publications Act (1857) in Great Britain and Comstock Act (1873) in the United States. However, it was used in common speech and the landmark indecency cases in the 20th century around James Joyce's *Ulysses* and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* changed that. Jablon's urgent text pieces echo some of the literary energy of those texts, and arguably could not have existed in a different era. There is a horror and violence, as much as beauty and visceral pleasure in Jablon's fucks. A scream into the endless void, by humanity isolated and looking inwards.

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