

## Samuel Jablon: Reflections, Words, and Painting

By Saul Ostrow

Today, when the objectification of sensations (concepts) and cognition (identification) increasingly precedes perception (sensation), knowledge production and acquisition come to dominate our culture and economy. In this world, anticipation and preconception progressively have come to define experience. The French theorist Jean Baudrillard in the 1990s identified this condition as symptomatic of our media-saturated-environment, which induces within us an inability to distinguish between the world of signs and simulations and the actual — consequently, TV programs, movies and celebrities supply models for human relationships and expectations. Samuel Jablon paintings are indifferent to this state of affairs in which everything becomes about something other than itself. His works do not operate as metaphor or symbol — instead his painting's afford their audience the opportunity to independently access the conflicting systems of references and associations that each work exists within.

Instead of being about any one thing in particular, Jablon's work appears to be driven by a desire to give expression to the embodied acts of speech, vision, cognition, aesthetic judgment, etc. that constitute our presence (and our subjectivity). These liminal and tacit acts of knowledge can only be self-consciously inferred, since they have no existence outside the body and our minds. To conjure up these instinctive yet self-conscious acts Jablon fractures not only material processes and but those of language was well. This results in various discords, which inhibit the work being reducible to the anecdotal or to commentary — this is what differentiates Jablon's work from that of such word painters as Ed Ruscha, Basquiat, Chris Wool, Monique Prieto, and Mel Bochner whose concerns remain rooted in references to their text and its content.

By not permitting signification (meaning) to be asserted where it cannot be derived, Jablon sets aesthetic value, against knowledge and thus forms an eclectic index as to what ends: language, aesthetics, materiality and visual effects may lead individually, or in combination with one another. Jablon's paintings in this way assert themselves as the medium by which his Subject (that which he seeks an understanding of) comes to be materially

stimulated (aroused). All else that the paintings offer are the result of a series of subjective decisions — their logic informs the work's sense. This schema places his work squarely within the hypothesis of the Russian literary theorist Andre Bahktin who argued that an artist's Subject (that which generates their work) is that aspect of their being, which they wish to objectify, so that they may explore it. In other words, in order to place their concerns into the world the artist must depersonalize to varying degrees that which they intuit by discovering a shared equivalencies. As such, the artist seeks to reproduce their response rather than merely represent what generated it.

For most people (unless impaired) language (systems of signification) is conceived of as a something that one comes to naturally — all one needs to do is unconsciously adhere to a few simple syntactical rules and their accompanying intonations and acquire a rudimentary vocabulary. The near thoughtless combination of these elements permits one to utter statements, commands, endearments, threats, etc. Literacy is a bit more difficult; it requires the ability to remember a sequence of ciphers and then to be able to decipher them. Conversely, writing requires one to order their thoughts in a linear manner. Ironically, all forms of language permit us to communicate both the sensical and the non-sensical — for instance; one may say, "I found gratification in the yellow pencil's desire for me." It was the Enlightenment's aspiration to order and rationalize the world and all things in it that resulted in understanding that the relation of words; to thoughts; to things was not a question of constructing a simple series of equivalencies but a complex systems network of substitutions. With this, language comes to be shrouded in mystery — for it is a subject that can barely address its self.

By putting his Subject (subjectivity and self-awareness) back into the world, Jablon places his endeavors within the bounds of a history. While abstract painting's history per se would be relevant, it is not the one that is most useful to understanding Jablon's project. Instead, of greater importance are those discourses that for more than a hundred years have delved into the complexity of language as spoken, written and interpreted, and its existence to that of experience. Jablon's work lies at the interface of experimental visual poetry and abstract

painting. What these two modes of expression share is that the objective of both is to bring to mind/ body their Subject, rather than describing it.

The genealogy of Jablon's work begins with the semiotics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when people found themselves living in a world of symbols and signs and representation was no longer a question of establishing correspondence. Writers and poets, as well as philosophers, scientists, and psychoanalysts sought, each in their own ways, to understand how language represents the objective (analytic) and the subjective (personal) world. Each sought to explain how words mean. Subsequently, some poets sought to free themselves from the linearity of language's forms by exploiting the indeterminacy and simultaneity they associated with the visual (and experiential).

Artists too were drawn to words — following on the Futurists, the Cubist, Dadaist, and Constructivist painted words as both image and sign. These artists began to produce collages that interspersed fragments of texts and image and exploited the new world of magazines and photomechanical reproduction. They pictorially explored the problematic relation that exists between words (spoken and written) and the material world these are meant to reference. The subordination of image to word (sign) that was a consequence of increased literacy is typified by Walter Benjamin's notion that no photograph can stand alone without a caption — it needs words to frame it — otherwise we become lost in its myriad details and referents. Marcel Duchamp understood (or intuitively) the supplementary nature of language as well when he produces the Readymade, which functions as an empty signifier — the arbitrary half of a sign, which stimulates associations (sensations), which are mentally assembled to produce a contextual sense, or inversely a non-sense.

The origin of Jablon's image/text paintings is to be found in the work of symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme and the father of concrete poetry Guillaume Apollinaire. Experimental poetry dawns with such means of mechanical representation and reproduction as the typewriter, the phonograph and the camera. What had previously been bodily functions were being standardized, objectified, and externalized. Against this background, these writers sought to transform their texts via typography into something more than a mere

transcription of phonemes and utterances. To differing effects they arranged their signifiers so as to assert their physical and visual presence and as such constitute still another text, which signifies, communicates, or expresses that which language in its self cannot. Such texts while readable, are unsayable.

Mallarme's has purposefully used blank space and the careful placement of words on the page to effectively produce multiple non-linear, silent readings of his texts. This tendency culminates in Mallarme's *Un coup de dés* (A Throw of The Dice), in which all the pages were to be printed in the same vertical format and in typography that uniformly produces staggered bars of words. Given the identical-ness of each page there was no indication that the pages are read in any particular order. Unpublished at the time of his death, Mallarme left written pleas that it be published exactly as he'd designed it. The artist Marcel Broodthaers, created a purely graphical version of *Un coup de dés*, using Mallarme's layout and replacing his words with uniform black bars, in this way emphasizing its structure while deprived of its literary content.

Following on the symbolist experiment, the Futurist's generate *Libre Parole* (word autonomy) with which they managed to free themselves of syntax, punctuation, and metrics. This resulted in the individual word and its typography becoming the main unit of expression. The Futurist also produced collage poems that rendered the text's structure as a concrete and visible aspect of its meaning. Such experiments are followed by Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, that were first published in 1918. These poems are noted for how the typeface and spatial arrangement of the words on a page effects how they may be read. The images formed by the typography plays a role in the meaning of each poem. Such works render written language as a rebus — a puzzle made from visual and linguistic elements — whose solution lies in the reader's ability to negotiate between the logic of each.

Jablon's paintings descend from the tradition of visual poetry — mixtures of texts and images used to construct narratives of association links. The words in his paintings made of mosaics of colored mirror, which are embedded in or placed upon abstract grounds are

meant specifically to be part of a visual work, rather than the unseen vehicles for literary content. The fragments of colored mirror he uses to assemble each letter and phrase are compositional devices. The breaks between each shard that make up each the letter and the breaks in the phrases that these form appear to be are a result of their need to fit onto the canvas rather than some preconceived logic, or design. These fractures and the reflective surfaces do not interfere, the words are readable. Inversely while physically existing on the surface as an object that exists between viewer and painting, the words reflect the world outside the painting creating an illusionist space behind its surface. Sometimes the grounds appear to be a response to these compositions — sometimes they appear to have been painted independently. The cumulative affect of the material conditions of each word or phrase, the organization of its forms come to be more important than their literary content, which often is non-sensical.

The seeming arbitrariness of Jablon's chosen phrase, the scale shifts and breaks in their lettering and their accompanying painterly affects, render painting (the object and the act) as a machine assembled from a multiplicity of systems of signification and modes of expression. The more the viewer tries to make sense of words and image the more they are left puzzling over what the painting represents and the more they attempt to gain access to the painting's meaning, the more the painting's content evades them. The fullness of the work resides in its resistance to being made meaningful in some narrative manner — that is in having some part subsume the whole for the sake of discerning what the work is *about*. It is through their lack of fixity that Jablon's paintings articulate the paradoxes, contingencies, differentiations, negotiations, and deferrals that are the pre-conditions of language, image, cognition, signification, interpretation, aesthetic judgment, etc.