

# HYPERALLERGIC

## GALLERIES

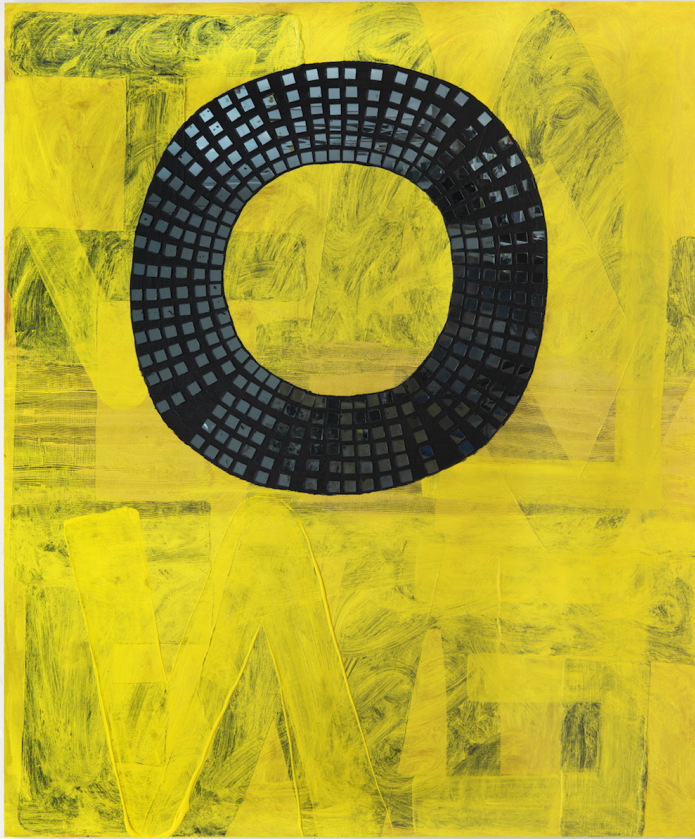
### Paintings that Set Letters and Language Free

by Jeffrey Grunthaner on May 11, 2016



*Installation view of Samuel Jablon's 'Life is Fine' at Freight + Volume (all images courtesy Freight + Volume)*

The poet James Schuyler once described the tidal influence that the New York art world had on the poetry he and his friends were writing as “floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble.” In *Life is Fine*, running concurrently at Freight + Volume on the Lower East Side and Arts + Leisure in Harlem, Samuel Jablon impressed me as an artist who is making Schuyler’s imagery literal.



*Samuel Jablon, "Lovin It" (2016), acrylic and glass tile on wood panel, 72 x 60 in*

Consisting of large-scale pieces mounted on wooden panels, and smaller works on paper, Jablon's paintings combine thick, gluey pigments that range in hue from garish colors to black, with subtle adornments of glass that look like diamante puncturing the flatness of a two-dimensional surface. The linguistic aspect of Jablon's work makes it something that can be both read and deciphered — at least on the surface. In fact, he generally uses paint

to obscure the legibility of phrases, causing a kind of dissolution of the visual aspects of language in a way that is nevertheless intensely visual.

The two spaces where Jablon's works are on view have contrasting ambiances. The works at Freight + Volume generally scale much larger than their uptown counterparts. Throughout the Lower East Side space, paintings whose grittiness seems to match the attitude traditionally associated with the surrounding neighborhood dazzle the eye and discountenance the mind. "Loving It" (2016) is a standout here. Jablon creates a bright, painterly chaos where a fog-like yellow masks lettering beneath it: a sheer nebula below which language struggles to syntactically

combine. This ensemble of forms and tones is punctuated by a giant black “O” just above the center of the work, sequined with tiles of reflective glass placed too high to be looked into directly.



*Installation view of Samuel Jablon's 'Life is Fine' at Arts + Leisure*

Uptown, at Art + Leisure, smaller works on paper line the walls, as well as some mid-sized works on panel. The smaller pieces extend the intimacy of the space. It was in this setting that I noticed certain words and phrases being repeated throughout the exhibition. “Beautiful,” “everything,” and “nothing” seem to come into sharper focus in the smaller scale works than the large. In “Everything is Beautiful” (2015), featured uptown, the titular phrase is dragged across and down the paper. The meaning of each word, painted in a warm, fleshy tone, is all but irrelevant against a swirling blue backdrop, where streaks of white form a pneumatic grid. Both uptown and downtown, more than a few of Jablon’s paintings resemble this one. “Everything Beautiful Dies,” “Crossroads,” and “Old Ways” — this last an embittered renovation of the truism “Old ways do not open new doors” — all provide architectural patterns against which language struggles to make sense.



Samuel Jablon, "Everything is Beautiful" (2015), acrylic and glass tile on paper, 15 x 11 in

The paintings in *Life is Fine* have a liminal, frustrated aura about them, as though each was an impasse. What's moving about this is the works' lack of neutrality. Jablon gives voice to a new lyricism: a physicalized language where words take on organic, gestural shapes. Using impasto brushwork to exacerbate the pacification of language that occurs when its critical capacity is limited to commentary and description, Jablon paints language that is no longer reduced to something to be read or seen — it becomes a kind of experiential playground.

In Jablon's use of language, words create worlds, eschewing the fixity of reference to revel in utopian otherworldliness. Generally, painters use their medium to look out onto a world, whether real, imagined, or digitally constructed. Going to shows in New York City, it's so often painting *and* something else; at the very least, painting is subsumed by some greater material or structural concern. Jablon, by contrast, poises color and texture against language and reference in order to engender a veritable *ding-an-sich*, a textured and textual surface addressing itself to everyone indifferently and no one in particular.



*Samuel Jablon, "Old Ways" (2015), acrylic, mirror, and glass tile on wood panel, 40 x 30 in*

Few artists create a textured surface as involving and, well, painterly as Jablon. I wasn't thrilled about his use of glass mosaic tiles at first, which generally decorate a single letter in a word, or reflectively highlight select letters, but I came around to them. He's used two types of glass here: clear stones that look like distended wedding rings; or smokey, opaque discs created through his own fusion process. These materials give the paintings an additional level of playfulness, and quite literally make their linguistic aspects pop as though spatially emulating some phonemic nuance.

The works in *Life is Fine* admirably bring into confluence, in a way that some might find difficult to appreciate, the painterly and the poetic. Jablon seems to have found the key to their union, synesthetically combining language with color and texture. Writing this now, I'm thinking of words of like "alchemy," "marriage," "fusion." Jablon's word paintings are all of these, but they speak much better for themselves.

*Samuel Jablon's Life is Fine continues at Arts + Leisure (1571 Lexington Avenue, Harlem, Manhattan) and Freight + Volume (97 Allen Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May 15.*