

## **Between Words and Sensuous Being**

*Barry Schwabsky*

With due respect to both artists, I want to begin these reflections on Samuel Jablon's recent paintings just where I concluded an essay I recently wrote about the work of Mel Bochner—both of them, of course, being artists who have engineered mash-ups between textuality or writing and painting, in all its visual and material fullness. Bochner's lesson, I concluded, was a twist on a famous admonition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's, who in his *Philosophical Investigations* made the most radical demand that any philosopher could possibly make of his fellow philosophers: "Don't think, but look!" (Hint: For Wittgenstein, it's what you *won't* see when you look that turns out to have philosophical significance.) Bochner's art, I thought, articulates a demand that is very difficult to follow when the art itself contains legible words; it tells us, "Don't read, but look!"

In this, Bochner's word paintings are very different from those of other artists who have made paintings out of text—Richard Prince with his joke paintings or On Kawara with his date paintings, for example. With them, understanding the painting depends at least in part on accepting the content of the inscription. I see both those artists as part of a lineage that goes back to Pop art—particularly to the early Pop paintings of Roy Lichtenstein, which were not paintings *of* writing but paintings that prominently included writing. "Why, Brad darling, this painting is a masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all New York clamoring for your work!" "I can see the whole room!...and there's nobody in it!" In all their broad-brushed irony, these legends make the artist's concern with art-about-art and the condition of visibility self-evident; whether the paintings' imagery is seen as an extension and articulation of the text's

meaning (the troubled look on Brad's face that indicates his diffidence at the value of having all New York at his feet, the straight-on view that paradoxically puts the painting's viewers in the role of "nobody") or vice versa, they are essentially in synch. Likewise, the impassivity of Prince's painting echoes the deadpan of a borscht belt comedian, while the elegant neutrality of Kawara's facture (and habitual achromatism) underlines the paintings' tautological content, which always reminds us that—as Hegel put it—"It is just not possible for us ever to say, or to express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*."

In contrast to the self-referential word paintings of Lichtenstein, Kawara, or Prince, Jablon, like Bochner, makes self-interfering word paintings. They make meaning precisely out of the space *between* words and what Hegel called "sensuous being." It's the space of embodied thinking—the space of pensiveness, and also sometimes of a certain anxiety. Words resonate in one's head—and we sometimes forget that the head is part of the body, but Jablon doesn't forget.

I'm not sure whether I should be all the more surprised at that, knowing that Jablon is a poet as well as a painter—some poets I know seem to live only in their heads, and to forget (at least until they get hungry) that their words are occurrences in a physical realm—or whether it's the fact that he's a poet that explains his sensitivity to the embodied nature of thought and language. Some poets seem to feel every vibration of a word as an adamantly corporeal event. Jablon must be one of those.

His paintings are more about paint than they are about words, and yet they are ineluctably about words too. But words and paint don't necessarily agree. Consider *Oaths Against Dying*. The palette, dominated by orange and yellow, is practically sundrenched (though not necessarily cheerful or optimistic for all that). A kind of glare

bounces all around it, and as glare usually does, it makes things harder to see. In this case, what's hard to see are most of the letters, all orange, that make up the phrase that gives the painting its title. Emerging most clearly, to my eye, are two pairs of letters in the top central portion of the work: AT and AG. The first of these, of course, could be a word, the preposition indicating presence, direction, or the like—but in English the syllable AG has no independent meaning, and so the pairing of these two pairs of letters seems asemantic; one thinks less about meaning than about visual form: about the way the two As, one above the other, constitute a reiteration, while the T above the G present a dichotomy, a rectilinear form versus a mainly curvilinear one.

But then the other letters surrounding these four emerge from the solar soup. But not always so clearly. One of the strangest passages in the painting is at the upper left, where the O of "oaths" seems to link up with the letter below it, the S that ends the same word—the fact that the lineation of the lettering does not respect the boundaries of the word is significant—so that the S seems like the string attached to a strangely heavy balloon, or maybe the tail of a lonely sperm cell. In any case, these letters are really on the verge of losing their alphabetical character and becoming, if not pictorial, at least pictographic. Elsewhere, the H in "oaths" and the NST in "against" seem on the verge of dissolving themselves into the evidently nonsignifying orange-on-white linear, gestural marks that surround them.

I don't need to go into every detail of this painting; I think what I've pointed out so far gives an adequate idea of how it keeps undermining the legibility that at times it seems to offer. Even the fact that the title reiterates the phrase inscribed on its surface, far from supporting the idea that the painting exists to body forth the words, essentially absolves the viewer from having to make out the inscription. Isolating the words in all

their literal clarity as a title means one need not *read* the painting—one need only, as Wittgenstein advised, *look*. Not that one ignores the letters, to the extent that one makes them out. (And eventually, of course, one can make them all out.) But the letters turn out to exist mainly as an armature for visual form—as a support for the gaze in its effort to explore the surface of the painting as such.

But what about the sense of the words? Their minatory import is hard to ignore, and it certainly chimes in with that of the titles/inscriptions of other recent paintings of Jablon's—*Eat Disasters*, *Death is Elsewhere*, and so on. But while the phrase “oaths against dying” has a meaning, oaths against dying have none. An oath is nothing if not binding, but whom could an oath against dying bind? In dissolving its own apparently portentous meaning, the phrase becomes the perfect jerrybuilt support for a harried and self-questioning formalism.

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