

Sam Jablon's Painted Language

Whenever we see a letter, we hear the speech sound, we recognize the symbol's place it holds in our cognition, and for that alone an 'L' or an 'R' or a 'Q', or any such representation from any language has aesthetic power. Painting or drawing that choice letter or word or sentence intensifies our attraction to an alphabet's design. A writing system must have a certain elegance to survive; and its beauty and use, furthermore, be both adored and contested. Some prefer one language, or dialect within a language to another. American English is a rather whorish language. It cannot stand an adequate singular translation for each variety of expressive speech it receives and contains into a suitable 'standard grammar.' There is definitely a basic set of grammatical rules in our English, but few of us so confined speakers actually talk that way. And the vast majority of us are unwilling, if able, to regularly write by those standards with any real competence. For proof of that we can review any series of written communication sent back and forth over social media platforms, daily text messages, and email correspondence. There is something splendid about the common license we take while using such media. The simplicity and candor of short sentences, phrases, and fragments we traffic in over electronic transmissions often satisfy life's urgencies. We are, these days, more than ever awash in words and symbols, and at the same time we are estranged from the various powers word-language bestows on people communicating in the flesh. Words have largely lost their mortal importance, and for that our use of them is slightly freer. Further, *any* 'standard', as it goes, is not always rational or functional in all language spaces. We know this. We take advantage of that reality. This fact emphasizes how much room remains for experimentation in the art of writing to study communicative forms that subvert convention. What keeps these activities alive, fresh, and interactive are the points of contact and overlap between legible boundaries of all kinds of language. Sam Jablon appreciates those intersections, using his poetic sensibility to mesh with the radically open characteristics of contemporary painting.

Exactly where into the chronicle of art Jablon's work drops to learn, borrow, and steal is curious. In the history of painting and poetry-as-visual-art in tandem, and among contemporaries, there are many useful points of reference - Kurt Schwitters, Richard Kostelanetz, Brion Gysin, Glen Ligon, Paul Thek, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Guillaume Apollinaire, the Russian Futurists, to name a few. Exploiting the poetic fragment is the initial gesture made in these paintings. Poetry is first. The word content in each of them comes from a poem that Jablon has written. It is a notional move that cast the paintings into perpetual subjunctive mood. Some of the phrases are lyrically compelling in spite of being seemingly incomplete thoughts, as in the bright red and orange painting "Half Destroyed Instruments Washed By Sun" (2018). There are the words, and right away there are images which (for me, crushed woodwinds on a rocky sunlit shore) come to mind. The phrase "Washed by Sun" appears as both title and text content in at least two other paintings. One is a two foot high, nearly as wide, canvas where the capitalized 'E', 'D', 'B' in the phrase anchor the graphic element of the canvas while the paint handling pushes, drags, and pulls coarse color juxtapositions of tangerine, fuschia, sky and navy blue, black, cream, slate, and some indefinable hues that appear from the mixing of

primaries, secondary, and tertiaries. The other is a diminutive square with the words written stacked applied in a bright brick-orange paint with white highlights against a solid black background. It looks like an album cover for a stadium rock band from the 1980's. A small but not insubstantial quirk is the occasional contour line with color fill to paint the letters. When that happens the letters vibrate a bit, and give the perception of the words sliding into and around each other. This also happens when the color of the respective letters in a phrase alternate over chromatic swaths, and, areas where one color is roughly obscured by line fill done in high contrast or incongruent overlay. A great example of this is in the larger canvas "Abandon Cruelties" (2018). There is a matching thorny elegance in the optical experience and moral preference shared by those scrambled words.

Jablon's paintings have a diaristic aspect of less quotidian than mind to mouth immediacy. Surrealist strains found in the varied American artistic tradition inform the poet-painter, giving his affection for superlative word combinations latitude. "Choices Blur With Rattlesnakes" or, "Comfort Can Go Fuck Itself" or "Whatever Happens This Is" - each titular fragment is instantly reconstituted as a poem, or equally though more populist, as slogan. Jablon's writing on canvas pops in part, too, because they bare the quality of having been disjoined from a text body then, continuing to live, like a clonal split regenerating itself midair. One of my favorites of Jablon's paintings is a one-word poem that reads "UNSTUNG" (2018). The painting itself, if we take in just the linear graphic qualities of the letter parts, the central Geometric shape, and modulation of color, is at once crisp and subtle, minimal. Still, our minds can jump in and out of the word, and, into and out of the painting back into the word and toward various verbal associations. There are few poets who cannot recognize the powerful charge of the poetic fragment. The disjunctive use of the fragment is foundational in contemporary literature. Reading the paintings, I immediately thought about the Queens, New York born poet Joseph Ceravolo (1934 – 1988) and went to the bookshelf. Ceravolo was magician-like at weaving fragments into fantastical lines, putting words together to conjure what before were seemingly impossible images. In the poem "Chains of Mountains", he writes, *The clouds are panting./ There is a subequal brightness./ It makes my eyelids shake / in the morning submarine of leaves.* Jablon's art is compatible with – should share a room with – a book that contains such lines. Though Ceravolo was somewhat of an outlier of the multi-generational grouped but aesthetically diverse artists and writers bannered the New York School, the long arm of influence of that post-WWII milieu in America's then most cosmopolitan city, creates some webbing with Jablon. Greater than an artistic movement, that 'school' is better thought of as a philosophy of deeply compassionate individualism. Appreciation for Jablon's paintings really starts from there.

Christopher Stackhouse's published books and essays include *Plural* (Counterpath Press), co-author with John Keene of *Seismosis* (1913 Press), and contributor to *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks* (Skira Rizzoli). He is currently completing a monograph on the work of painter Stanley Whitney for the publisher Lund Humphries. He teaches at Bloomfield College, Center for Technology + Creativity.