



*Poetry
Til
You're
Red
in the
Face:
Sam Jablon's
Paintings
are
Never Quiet*

*Written by
William Corwin*

Sam Jablon's paintings sing to you. Or they chant, or yell, or tease; but they are never quiet: a few poignant words lushly painted on a seethingly colorful background. The artist's new Brooklyn studio is entered right off the street, a jarring transition, chilly to warm; from the bleak, gray, and gritty wide sidewalks of a Bushwick thoroughfare of grinding 18-wheelers and the distant sirens of Flushing Avenue to a warm sparse zone of bright throbbing square canvases and the smell of oil paint and turpentine. I ask Jablon about his upcoming exhibition in Sweden and he responds by just listing what the paintings say: "It's pretty much in front of you, so, like, this one which says 'Endless Passion,' and then this one says 'Baby Lies,' and then this one says 'Joker Joker Joker,' and



PREVIOUS PAGE
BAD BAD BAD
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Linen
72"x64"

OPPOSITE PAGE
SAM JABLON
Photo By Jesse Frohman

DESIRE
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Canvas
48"x44"

'Desires,' and 'Nothing Bad Happens,' and 'Glamorous Voids,' and 'No Bad Days,' and 'Time Time Time.'" A description of a show has never been so literal—but it doesn't take that long to get your head around the painter's work, though it takes much longer to get used to the presence of the paintings in your space.

Jablon has been tuning his voice since he started at Naropa's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, where he studied with poetic and political legends like Amiri Baraka, Anne Waldman and particularly downtown New York great Bob Holman. Holman oversaw the young poet's development when Jablon moved to New York after school, but in college he was also a driving force, "Bob really



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passenger on the subway

you don't want to be sitting near.

was about wanting to perform: we wrote poems as a group—we did a poem about protesting gas prices, and then printed all the poetry on fake money, and then went to a gas station and performed this 'gas prices are too high' poem and then handed out dollars with all the poems on them. People loved it. It was Colorado, and the gas prices were really high, so everyone was like, yeah, fuck these gas prices." Baraka was more circumspect, he expected the poets to do their homework and then expand their consciousness to simultaneous poetic movements around the world—if the subject was the 70's, then students needed to know what poets were writing not only in New York, but in Russia, Africa, China—to gain an understanding of the collective consciousness.

These notions of disembodied poetics, collective consciousnesses' (or unconsciousnesses' for that matter) jump out of the paintings. Bad Bad Bad is a bright red spidery text against cool aqua green. The colors aren't complementary—they vibrate and flicker, you can hear the painting behind you in the studio, mumbling like that passenger on the

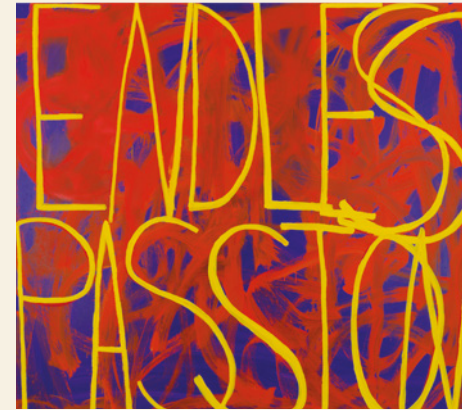
subway you don't want to be sitting near. Baby Liessss has three extra S's: "The S's sort of make it hiss" explains Jablon. The painting could mean so many things: are baby lies like "little white lies?" Or is it someone accusing their lover of treachery, as in Baby Liessss? The artist is convinced that one of his paintings is genuinely dishonest "Nothing Bad Happens is such a lie" he quips, but I'm not convinced. What about Magritte and his infamous "This is not a Pipe" painting? Aren't all paintings lies—they're all illusions, are illusions negative? "I don't know if lying is negative," Jablon fires back. Touché.

A few months before this visit, Jablon, myself, and art critic Saul Ostrow were sitting in the back of Clandestino's—the current artist's bar in New York—in the tradition of the Cedar tavern of the 50's and Max's of the 70's and 80's. Jablon wanted Saul to see his recent writing. Scrolling a bit too fast for either Saul or myself to read, his thumb would stop swiping for a second to give us a glimpse of some words. "I'll just be like writing all the time on my phone like in an endless word document: it just goes endlessly. Some

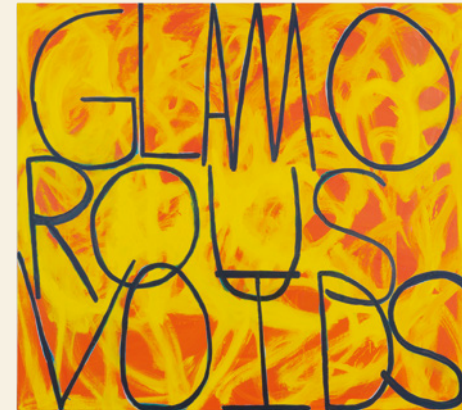




JOKER
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Linen
44"x48"



ENDLESS PASSION
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Linen
64"x72"



GLAMOROUS VOIDS
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Linen
64"x72"



MIRRORS
Sam Jablon, 2022
Oil on Linen
44"x48"



DOOMED
Sam Jablon, 2020,
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas,
48"x40"

**NOTHING BAD HAPPENS**

Sam Jablon, 2022,
Oil on Linen,
64"x72"

things are absolutely horrible in there, and some things are real gems. I go through it and edit it down. Maybe out of four pages I get a painting."

It was dark and noisy in the bar, and distracting, an atmosphere where the painter feels comfortable creating. Jablon came to New York after Naropa and found a home at Bob Holman's Bowery Poetry Club, where the elder poet would host nightly poetry slams and readings—Holman rejuvenated the idea of the poetry slam, where poets do more than read, they yell, sing, and talk to the audience, much like the paintings. I think of the painting *Don't Panic*; there's a performer on stage in front of a hostile, or even worse, indifferent and bored crowd. In the painting, all of the bright orange letters have a hairy frenetic quality, made by the painter dragging the cadmium color out into the dark blue background with his fingertips. Every letter is freaking out, except N, which is solid and doesn't panic. "When I first moved Bob kind of sat me down at the table with Taylor Mead every Monday, and he was like, "learn everything you can from this guy." Taylor Mead was

one of Andy Warhol's Superstars, and a denizen of the East Village who would bug every youngish man who sat down next to him at the bar for a drink. I ask what he learned from Mead, and he laughs, "Just be wild. Once a roach crawled out of his bookbag, I was like Eww, but he was kind of wonderful. I have memories of him holding a radio over his head and screaming. That was his Monday night at the Bowery Poetry Club."

Jablon's paintings don't harp on specific subjects—he, and we, are the subjects. It's a sneaky gambit: if we read his paintings to ourselves—they're his thoughts; if we say them out loud—they become ours. The artist pulls from a lot of different inspirations and sources. Cy Twombly and Jean-Michel Basquiat are two of his biggest inspirations. But text-based artist, painter, and activist Mira Schor also made an impression on Jablon. In Schor's almost daily Instagram posts, she crosses out headlines from the New York Times and corrects them, inserting painfully accurate words in red, in place of the Times' bland euphemisms for racism, suffering, and inequity. Not surprisingly, Jablon

discovered her work through a feminist theory class in graduate school.

Once Jablon has isolated some words or a phrase from his never-ending iPhone word document, he draws it on paper. I was amazed at his precise approach—a spiral bound sketch book with four neatly drawn rectangles on each sheet—each one a different painting. Within three or four pages I witness the whole embryonic show for Sweden. Once he's conceptualized the paintings, then the arduous process of putting them on canvas begins, and a whole different set of artists influences creep in—Bushwick native Joyce Pensato, Stanley Whitney, Joan Mitchell, Katherine Bradford and Elizabeth Murray (coincidentally the wife of poet Bob Holman). These artists are deep into paint, and brush, smear, drip and erasure. Jablon himself is not a tweaker of images or texts, he's all-or-nothing: "It's sort of like, ok, this didn't work, and then just obliterate it, then see what's left, and then building off what's left from it being obliterated. *Nothing Bad Happens* took about a year, that painting probably said a million things. Some are quick, and some just take

forever." The biggest obstacle, or perhaps perk, is the paint drying slowly: the artist wipes away the text, erasing his words and mashing them into the background, and then leaves the miasmic jumble of blended colors and ghost letters there to dry, which takes months. He lives with it, and this beautiful but inscrutable cloud becomes a layer in the history of the painting; "it kind of builds up until it gets to a point where I'm like, now I'm satisfied."

It's the synthesis that matters in the end—the painting and the text support each other, an investigative process for which it took years to find the sweet spot. "Even when I was just writing poetry, the poems were always just super visual on a page. They never made the most sense as poems on their own—they really needed to exist in a more visual world." He continues: "How poetry could become line and color, or figure and ground, like instead of having a portrait of a person, how could the portrait just be text? But not be cheesy. It took me a while to figure out how to handle paint in a way that could make that work." It's funny because as we talk, peeling away the layers of Jablon's practice, the explanation of his process has a sweet, beautiful, if not slightly Freudian origin: Jablon's mother, a photorealist painter, worked as a manager at the Barnes & Noble store in Binghamton, NY. "She was doing inventory and stuff and I would be there for hours...So it really came out of me waiting for her to get off her shift, and I'd just kind of hang out in the art and poetry section, and I would just read poetry. I never felt like I had time to read a novel, but I always had time to read poetry."

DON'T PANIC

Sam Jablon, 2022,
Oil on Linen,
48"x44"



Photo by
Jesse Frohman



MORGAN PRESENTS,
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SAM JABLON AND
ODILI DONALD ODITA
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