

Raw and Anarchic

John Yau

6 Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been painters who wrote poetry (Marsden Hartley and Milton Resnick) and poets and writers who painted (D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller), but when it comes to an individual who does each with equal strength and is in fact both a painter and a poet, the handful of names begins to dwindle. One person who stands out to me is Samuel Jablon, who received a BA in Writing and Literature from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado, which Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman started in 1974. After graduating, Jablon moved to New York and earned his MFA in Visual Art at Brooklyn College.

In his recent group of paintings, which he has collectively titled *kcuf* (2020), Jablon has pared his vocabulary down to a profanity, written backwards. Along with the *kcuf* series, he has made paintings and drawings of the words DOOMED, CHAOS, and DON'T PANIC. Each individual painting is titled with the same word or words — a profanity, pronouncement, or self-admonishment — that he has inscribed on the surface. Started before the Covid-19 pandemic began to dominate daily life, Jablon's work seems to me the perfect expression of our current state of despair, anger, and frustration.

We are living in a state of chaos partially caused by a divided, dysfunctional government, which causes many of us to feel doomed. We vacillate between two states of isolation, in which we are either trying to reassure ourselves (don't panic) or, out of anger, exasperation, and even disappointment, we inevitably find ourselves uttering fuck, loudly or softly.

While these words convey the artist's constant state of anxiety during the pandemic, exacerbated by the feeling of being cut off from other humans due to "social distancing" — the origins of his paintings and works on paper are deeper and more general than such specific, albeit extreme, conditions. If anything, Jablon's anxiety is collective and expansive, a state of nervous apprehension that began years before we started living in quarantine, wary of what the air or a stranger might be carrying.

When we look at the *kcuf* paintings, are we to read/see the word as a noun, verb, or interjection? What is this visually rendered profanity expressing? Do we find it vulgar? And if we do, why? It seems to be directed at no one in particular. It is a guttural utterance — a range of expressions from irony to despair rolled into one — but that is not all it signifies in Jablon's work.

Consider the gap between the time it takes to say "FUCK" and how long it took for the artist to make a painting of the word. That gap, I would claim, is integral to the meaning of these works. His labor is directed toward shaping his feelings of turmoil without denying their constant, agitating presence.

7 For one thing, Jablon seems intent on delaying our comprehension of the word, though he never quite succeeds. He writes the letters backwards, two in the upper half and two in the lower half. The letters are like stick figures and, in that sense, come across as vulnerable. If he rotates them, the C and U begin to resemble each other, leading to a momentary confusion. For all of the immediacy of the word, its sonic force, what we are looking at is a process painting, a layered surface in which the same word has been painted over, churned up, and obliterated, but never fully subsumed by Jablon's engagement with wet-on-wet paint and oil sticks.

The surface of the paintings varies from a brushy, thinly painted monochromatic ground to a turbulent, multicolored, stucco-like surface. The scale also shifts from modest to large — from an intimate whisper, you might say, to a loud shout.

In one work, there is a diamond floating off center, and over it the artist has written "FUCK" backwards. The color and tactile surface inflect the word. Certainly, his use of fiery reds is emotionally different from the pink, lavender, and turquoise in the same painting. The paintings and works on paper aren't mechanical in their making, and the words are never drawn in an orderly, linear fashion.

The fact that this particular vulgarity keeps resurfacing, despite the relentless reworking of the paint, until it distinguishes itself from the ground, evokes the constancy of anxiety. Meanwhile, the painting process — the direct engagement with the work's surface — chronicles the artist's attempt to control and shape his inchoate feelings.

It is as if the word or words jump forth from the vexed paint as they do from the speaker's mouth.

In a world where name-calling, finger-pointing, and condemnation of one individual or group by another has become the norm, Jablon's vulgarity reminds us how much the illusion of civil discourse has permanently receded in the rear-view mirror. Perhaps vulgarity is the only efficient expression we have in the vacuum left by the absence of dialogue.

Jablon has written the word "FUCK" backwards in four big letters, which we put together in our mind's eye, and are likely to silently mouth. This is what pulls us in. We are implicated in the paintings because, as we all surely realize, we live in a society dominated by a pandemic, and none of us can rise above the steady hum of anxiety and fear flooding through our daily lives.

There is nothing cynical, smug, or ironic about Jablon's *kcuf* paintings. The placement of the letters, which breaks up a single syllable, and their backward presentation underscore the instability of language, even when it is profane. This instability is one of the many ways that Jablon distinguishes himself from older artists such as Mel Bochner and Christopher Wool.

His use of a single profanity should remind us that words are made of separate sounds compressed together. In this sense, Jablon's *kcuf* paintings are rooted in Dada sound poetry, and its expressions of disgust and dark humor. They are not as clean and aesthetically tailored as the word paintings of Bochner and Wool. They are not emotionally cool.

Rather, they do something that I think speaks to this period's deeply rooted angst and despair. They are simultaneously raw and tempestuous. They never smooth out their coarseness, nor do they try to temper their agitation. They embody our emotional anarchy, visually and viscerally.

John Yau has three books forthcoming: monographs on Liu Xiaodong (Lund Humphries, 2021) and William Tillyer (Rizzoli, 2021) and a collection of poems, *Genghis Chan on Drums* (Omnidawn, 2021).



Fuck, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 78 x 70 in (198 x 178 cm)