

Samuel Jablon: To the Letter

Raphael Rubinstein

What strikes me first in Samuel Jablon's paintings isn't what you might expect, those clunky, backwards, broken-up words that blare out in upper-case insistence from every one of his canvases, but, rather, the varieties of spaces he creates around and underneath his texts. Take, for instance, the recent painting *Time Time Time*, a large rectangular canvas featuring, behind the spindly orange lettering spelling out the title phrase, a mass of feathery green and orange-to-red brushstrokes that have been laid down over a bright yellow ground. Heightening the dramatic effect of these passages, which suggest a roaring furnace or a vivid sunset, is a black geometric shape on the bottom, which serves as a kind of fragmented frame or matte for the vigorous brushstrokes. Jablon has further complicated the painting by partially filling in areas around the letterforms with silver-gray scribbled lines. As the gray lines and orange words—reversed as in a mirror reflection so that we have to read them backwards—cling to the picture plane, the underlying elements seem to push back deeply into an illusionistic space. In this painting, flatness (i.e., writing) and depth (i.e., gesture) coexist, albeit uneasily.

While not all of Jablon's paintings possess as deep a background as *Time Time Time*, there is always a distinct separation between what happens on the flat textual plane and in the more commodious painterly space beneath it. In *Nothing Bad Happens* (another reversed-text composition) the space is shallower as fibrous clumps of orange and yellow brushstrokes seem to be pressing softly against the backs of the letters. In a smaller painting with the same text the space is also shallow, but, in a stylistic turn, with geometric bands of pale gray against a washed-out blue ground.

In order to understand the spatial disjunctions in Jablon's paintings it's helpful to know something of his process. He starts with the abstract ground, often combining acrylic and oil paint. This phase involves a lot of trial and error, a lot of wiping and scraping away what he's painted and starting again, a lot of waiting. Only when the ground has been laid down and the paint has dried does Jablon introduce text, which is almost always applied with oil stick. He is as demanding of the letters as of the grounds, often changing the color of the text 10 or 15 times in a single painting. As a result it often takes three months or longer for him to finish a painting, and his studio is always filled with many works-in-progress.

One of Jablon's favored studio implements is oil stick, which he largely relies on for the lettering in his paintings. In contrast to writing done with a paintbrush, oilstick letters tend to be stiff and blocky. In Jablon's paintings, language seems to come forth haltingly, awkwardly, all the more so when the words are reversed. But we shouldn't see the awkward quality of Jablon's block letters as a sign of casualness. In fact, he is meticulous about making them, not only getting the color right but

obsessively touching them up with brushes and blobs of paint he picks up from his paint table. Ultimately what he wants to achieve with the letters is a palpable physical presence, thus endowing poetry with a haptic materiality, creating something related to Robert Smithson's "heap of language."

In some of the paintings that Jablon has been making in his Brooklyn studio during the long months of the pandemic shutdown in New York he repeats words or phrases from one canvas to another as a way to confront the strange sameness of days after day in social isolation. The texts of many recent paintings, texts that usually begin with poems by the artist, beg to be read as commentary on the anxious moment we are all facing: "Out of control," "Don't Panic," "Eat Disasters" and, more bluntly, "Chaos" and "Trouble." Another ominous sounding phrase, "Evil Flowers," is no doubt a nod to Baudelaire's collection of grim symbolist lyrics, *Les Fleurs du Mal*. As he has done on other occasions, for this exhibition at Nancy Littlejohn, Jablon invites us to read the ensemble of paintings on view as constituting a single poem.

Responding to current events in the world isn't new for this artist. As he explained to fellow painter Mike Cloud in 2016, he had been moved by the November 2015 terrorist attack at the Bataclan nightclub in Paris:

In the middle of my preparing for this show a few months ago, the events in Paris happened, where all those people were shot in that nightclub. That's when I was working on this painting [*Beautiful*, 2015]. It occurred to me, "Oh, you can be having an amazing time, and all of the sudden, it can flip, like that, to a completely horrible time." Within a minute. That's what I was thinking about, and that is why this painting says, "what a beautiful time," and it's really dark and really black. It represents that reality for me at that moment. (Conversation published in the catalogue of Jablon's 2016 show "Life Is Fine" at Freight & Volume, New York)

As we absorb the words in Jablon's paintings it is helpful to remember that he did his undergraduate studies in creative writing at Naropa University where his teachers included three fearlessly original poets: Amiri Baraka, Bob Holman and Anne Waldman, each of whom helped inform his approach to language. Subsequently, he earned his MFA at Brooklyn College where his teachers included Vito Acconci, whose own trajectory from poet to artist furnished Jablon with an inspiring model, and Archie Rand, a painter for whom text, and poetry in particular, has long been central. Text has, of course, been crucial to many visual artists, from Dada and Cubism to the "writerly" painters of the postwar era like Cy Twombly to the advent of Conceptual Art, to say nothing of the many great artist-writer collaborations. Jablon draws on these traditions, while remaining firmly grounded in the present.

We can clearly see how Jablon negotiates between tradition and innovation by comparing his process with that of Willem de Kooning's. In the 1950s, de Kooning would sometimes begin a painting by drawing a random letterform onto the canvas. By the time the painting was finished, the initial letter would be nearly lost in a welter of layered brushstrokes. For de Kooning, a letter was simply a convenient way of getting a painting started. Jablon neatly reverses this sequence of steps. He begins with layers of painterly activity and only introduces letters at the very end of

his process. Yet in one way his and de Kooning's paintings are similar: in both cases, the finished work permits us to relive its history, to experience it as a complex record of its own making, and unmaking.

Raphael Rubinstein is a New York-based writer and art critic whose numerous books include *The Miraculous (Paper Monument, 2014)*, *A Geniza* (Granary Books, 2015) and a recent monograph on Guillermo Kuitca (Lund Humphries, 2020). His poetry has appeared in, among other places, *Fence*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and in *Best American Poetry 2015*. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art.