

Samuel Jablon in Conversation with Francesca Gavin

Sam Jablon deconstructs language into objects. His approach to narrative and structure is intentionally inventive and fragmentary. Here vibrant, colourful canvases are covered in words or phrases that can be assembled, reassembled and taken apart. Yet they still retain some sense of meaning. These smaller canvases echo the intimacy of the book page or the spoken word. The content is captured from his experience of urban space, particularly in New York City. The artist notes down snippets of conversation, advertising slogans and social phrases which become the starting point for series of paintings that expose the emotional litmus of the city, and play with the history and experience of painting itself.

Francesca Gavin: How do you structure your work? If you remove a line or word, that doesn't bother you?

Samuel Jablon: It ends up always working like that. The show kind of creates the final result.

FG: Why you sometimes write words or phrase backwards, and position the letters the way you do?

SJ: I like to make them as illegible as possible, to slow down the read of them. When the words are repetitive they are very quick reads. Like when I write 'Sun' three times, it's very easy for people. But I'm into slowing people down to where they actually look at [words] as a painting. It's almost like a trick. It tricks people to slow down and read it. Originally, when I was making abstract paintings, people would glance at them, walk away, and then that was it. The second I started putting words in paintings, they started staying two, three minutes. The harder I made it to read and the more illegible I made it, the longer people just stared and looked at the painting. So, I just try to push it in every way possible to where they're on the brink of legibility.

FG: There's obviously a strong relationship to poetry. Do you see anything between that sense of speed and rhythm and the literary nature of the content? The idea that slowness relates to a change of line, a pause, punctuation, and those kind of things?

SJ: Yeah, for sure. I like bringing people in by using words, everyone wants to read when they see written language. The paintings can be three or four words, but the way I paint slows down the poem, and makes people see the painting.

FG: I'm interested in the idea of turning language into an object. We're used to the word being something two-dimensional in a way or even almost like non-dimensional in our head. What do you find interesting about turning text into a thing?

SJ: I'm really into the materiality of things. In these in painting, I use very thick oils. There's a real physicality and materiality to them. They really have a physical presence as an object. It's anti-digital. It's an object. It's a thing. It's present. It has different meanings at

different times. I've noticed that about my work. I have a painting 'Trouble,' and people were reading it in my last show in New York as about Trump, which I don't really think so much about. People really bring something to them. I like that they just become these objects that people come to as opposed to opening a book. When I was studying poetry and writing my poems were always really visual. They weren't the easiest to sit through and read as a book. They really just needed physical space.

FG: What do you find interesting about fractured narrative?

SJ: That's a good question. I feel like we're living in a really fractured moment. I'll read news headlines and everything just seems like the world's always ending at every moment.

FG: Which it is!

SJ: It seems everything's broken and falling apart. I guess that is where a lot of the poetry is coming from. I'll write down a phrase I hear. I guess where the poetry comes in is that it's all built off these fractured moments, and I'll edit down all these moments into a text, and that becomes the paintings.

FG: So, is it very much a reflection of urban experience? You transcribe some of the things you hear around you.

SJ: Yeah, for sure. I mean I use my phone instead of a notebook. I'll change it and alter it into what it ends up becoming. But that is where a lot of it starts. I'll just be riding the subway or be walking around the city for a while and overhear, find inspiration and write things down.

FG: You often scrawl things. You could make things clean and simple and linear, and you're not. You're intentionally going for something more textured and raw.

SJ: There's definitely a rawness to them. They are against the digital. They're really about this physicality and this rawness that's very human, I think. We spend so much time in front of a screen. A lot of the paintings have this backlit quality where it's almost like there's this depth and then the surface seems to be illuminated from behind. I am into that idea when you're looking at a screen - there is this depth to it.

FG: It reminds me of people like Mel Bochner or William Pope L.

SJ: For sure, yeah. Two of my favorites. I think Pope L is going for the disgusting and the political and shock statement. He never gives people what they want really. We both have backgrounds in poetry. He's making really a political statement in the States about being black. The last piece I saw of his was a video. I was sitting in this room he built at the gallery watching him try to balance a pie on a boner. That was the piece.

I think Bochner is more of a conceptualist. The paintings have always felt like concrete to me, they are hard to argue with, and their meaning is very clear. His use of color and materiality of paint I've always found to be beautiful.

FG: Tell me about the idea of the optimism and pessimism in your work. Some pieces are just like joy. The 'Sun, Sun, Sun,' it's pretty hard not to feel like pleasure in that. Other things, it feels very much about emotional resonance in some ways.

SJ: I like it when the paintings are dark and the text is really upbeat and positive, or vice versa. There also always needs to be a balance to a body of work. If I write "Sun, Sun, Sun" I will also have a painting that says "Faith in Poison". I find this tension important.

FG: What poets and writers are you influenced by?

SJ: I like E.E. Cummings. Alice Notley. Mónica de la Torre. I read contemporary American poets for the most part. I went to this school called Naropa. It was founded by Allen Ginsberg and run by the New York poets, the Beat poets, and the language poets. That's definitely where I come out of. I go back to that stuff a lot. How the Beats are trying to push cultural change in America through poetry, just by being as descriptive and visceral as possible, They just really owned that, like Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" really owned being a gay man on drugs in the 50s and made America deal with it. I just love the radicalness of it. Frank O'Hara is a big influence; just riding the subway and writing these little emotional blurbs.

FG: Do you think there's something connected about the shortness of phrase and intimacy of scale in your work?

SJ: Definitely. It's a phrase. There's kind of this sort of anti-advertising thing. We are being bombarded with ads everywhere you turn I kind of steal that use of language.

FG: Do you feel like the work is a reflection of New York somehow?

SJ: I think so. Someone said my paintings reminded them of an industrial landscape. I grew up in Binghamton; it is kind of like a mini Detroit. It's all these just giant, empty warehouses surrounded by hills and mountains. It was a raw experience living there. Binghamton went from this quaint little town to having serious inner-city drug problems. It was like a sheriff with this little pistol going up against some drug dealer with an uzi and just being like 'I don't know how to stop that.' A wealthy city collapsed. Yet everyone is optimistic.