



ArtSeen

June 5th, 2014

STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN!

MEL BOCHNER *Strong Language*

by Richard Kalina

THE JEWISH MUSEUM | MAY 2 – SEPTEMBER 21, 2014

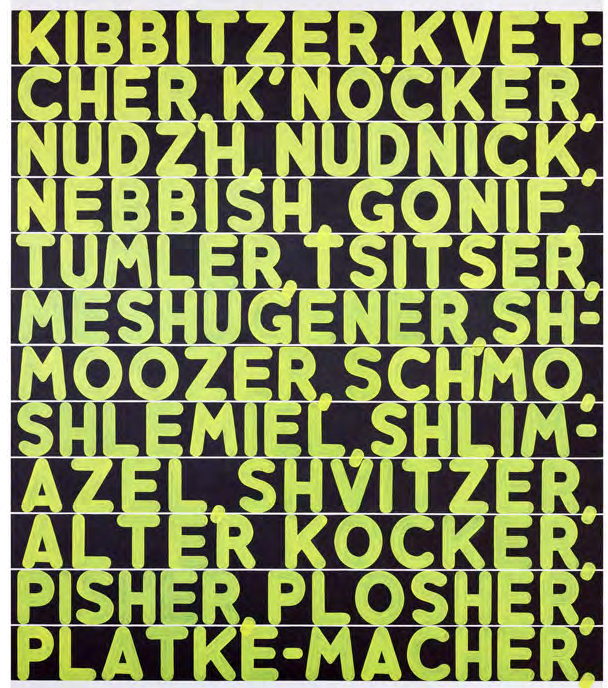
Mel Bochner, one of the founders of the Conceptual Art movement of the mid-'60s, and quite possibly the most inventive, clear-headed, and thought-provoking artist of that group, is showing his language-based paintings and drawings this spring and summer at the Jewish Museum. The exhibition, titled *Strong Language*, and perceptively curated by Norman Kleeblatt, is Bochner's first major solo museum show in New York. The paintings, mostly large-scale works, have been done in the last 15 years or so, and were built on the foundation of his austere word drawings of the mid to late '60s. These paintings and drawings function as an oblique investigation, inspired by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, into the essential slipperiness and ambiguity of language—an ongoing concern of Bochner's, and one that he has explored in many formats over the course of his 50-year career.

The early drawings, a number of them ink-on-graph paper, are word portraits of his friends and contemporaries—Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, or Sol LeWitt, for example—and are small, restrained, and elegant. The paintings—the key ones in the show are from his *Thesaurus* series—are another story. They are, to put it bluntly, completely in your face: aggressive, negative, vulgar, relentless, and really funny. They tell you (in caps and most often in screaming color) to COOL IT, GAG IT, KNOCK IT OFF, PIPE DOWN, PUT A LID ON IT, JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP, FISH OR CUT BAIT, SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT, GO FUCK YOURSELF. Got a problem with that? Don't let it trouble you, because you are FUCKED UP AND FAR FROM HOME, UP TO YOUR ASS IN ALLIGATORS, YOUR DICK CAUGHT IN A ZIPPER, ONE TIT IN A WRINGER, GOING OUT OF BUSINESS, CALLING IT QUILTS. Will it get better? Not likely.

Pretty soon you'll CASH IN YOUR CHIPS, KICK THE BUCKET, FEED THE WORMS, GIVE UP THE GHOST, GO BELLY UP, BUY THE FARM. Serves you right, you KIBBITZER, KVETCHER, NUDNICK, NEBBISH, GONIF, SCHLEMIEL, SCHLIMAZEL, SCHMO, MESHUGENER. And language? Language? BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH. This is not the stance we would typically expect from a veteran conceptualist, but painting is somehow key to it. (Unless of course we have wandered into a celebrity roast at the Modern Language Association.)

Bochner was trained as a painter but stayed away from it during his early professional years. He felt that it was an exhausted form—at least for him—and concentrated his efforts on what might be thought of as less historically binding media. He considered himself a painter who just didn't happen to paint. But Bochner was never an artist to accept anyone else's idea of what was possible. And so despite all

the "painting is dead" talk roiling the art world, he came to realize that painting could be every bit as effective a vehicle for launching ideas as anything else. In fact, for certain modes of representation, it was the most efficient and evocative. Rather than limiting options, the historical and stylistic stew of signs inherent in painting provided the artist with a storehouse of meaning (the word "thesaurus" means treasury or treasure) that readily lent itself to the kind of canny manipulation at which Bochner is so adept. You can be straightforward or elliptical; you can mask intention or reveal it. As such, the paintings in this exhibition are anchored by a relatively straightforward display of words and lettering—arranged, in expected fashion, from left to right, working their way from the top of the canvas to the bottom. With that structure as a given (more or less), Bochner allows himself the freedom to exploit and subvert the complete range of postwar painting techniques and styles—from full-throated expressionism, to minimalist restraint and seriality, to Color Field sensuality, Op Art dazzle, or Pop boldness. As sheer text, the paintings are ostensibly straightforward, but perceptually they are far from it. The continual tug of war between the visual and the verbal, the time it takes to untangle the colored letters from each other and from their complex grounds (the striped ones work particularly well in this way), forces a kind of agnosia—an inability to recognize—upon the viewer. We read, but struggle to focus and understand. Bochner's perceptual "delaying mechanism" has been commented on, and it is interesting to compare it to Duchamp's description of "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" (1915 – 23), as a "delay in glass."



Mel Bochner, "The Joys of Yiddish," 2012. Oil and acrylic on two canvases, 100 × 85". The Jewish Museum, New York, NY. Purchase: The Muriel and William Rand Collection Gift, by exchange, and Hyman and Joan C. Sall Gift Artwork © Mel Bochner.

As Duchamp was wont to do, Bochner pushes up against the resistant core of the quotidian—the unknown and the unknowable residing in the obvious and the ordinary. Language functions as the fundamental form of abstraction we engage with on a daily basis—so fundamental that we hardly see it at all, much less recognize it as an abstract and abstracting entity. It is the mental air we breathe and we ignore it unless it is taken away from us or is, in some sense, poisoned or damaged. In Bochner's case, the abstraction of language naturally allies itself with the abstraction of painting. Art that deals directly with language confronts, of necessity, its essential abstraction, its simultaneous referencing of and removal from physical experience, as well as its tendency to hide in plain sight.

Bochner grappled with the difficulties (or maybe impossibilities) of representing the means of representation in an early, canonical work, "Language is Not Transparent," first executed in 1970 and reinstalled in different configurations over the years. Its most recent incarnation is in the current exhibition. In this apparently clear-cut but ultimately mysterious work, Bochner paints a section of wall with a rectangle of black, clean-edged on three sides, irregular and dripping on the bottom. Chalked in capital letters on the black(board?) is the following: "1. LANGUAGE IS NOT TRANSPARENT."

Questions arise. Is it a proposition? Is it self-evident? Is it true? To what extent is it paradoxical? If it is not transparent, is it opaque? Does that opacity render it visible and examinable or hidden and incomprehensible? Where and what is number two?

Language's non-transparency suggests that it is culturally delimited, that we see words given form and stripped of neutrality by context. This is clearly in evidence in the language paintings and installations dealing with Jewish concerns. Bochner was born in 1940 and raised in an observant Jewish household where Yiddish was spoken. "The Joys of Yiddish" (2012)—the title is based on Leo Rosten's popular 1965 book—gives us a series of generally derogatory (and familiar) Yiddish words, but renders them in yellow paint against a black ground—the same colors of the Star of David armbands that the Nazis forced Jews to wear. Bochner reprised this in a 345-foot-long yellow and black strip that ran boldly along the frieze of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, the museum Hitler built to celebrate German art. There is a nicely triumphant quality to the Munich piece, but quite the opposite effect is to be seen in a small, scary painting, "Jew" (2008). On a black, but grayed-out background, Bochner has loosely written in transparent yellow paint a litany of mostly hateful synonyms for Jew. Bochner found the list—so similar in general format to his thesaurus sources—on an anti-Semitic Internet site. It was an upsetting



Mel Bochner, "Silence!," 2011. Oil and acrylic on two canvases, 80 × 120 " Courtesy of the Hadley Martin Fisher Collection Artwork © Mel Bochner.

experience, and reminded the artist, as he noted in a lecture at the Institute of Fine Arts in 2007 that, “As recent history has painfully taught us, all abuses of power begin with the abuse of language.”

Bochner’s work has always displayed admirable rigor and concision. He has never been afraid to tackle big issues, especially philosophical ones. He will do what it takes to get his ideas across, and has given himself the freedom to use whatever tools are at hand. Often the works have been made with ephemeral materials: newspaper, masking tape, a soaped up window. But when he has felt it necessary to work in the traditional mediums of the painter’s craft—and it seems that he increasingly has—he will do so without hesitation. Bochner’s art has often been ascetic, even severe—a few lines on a note card, a row of numbers on a length of tape, a handful of matchsticks glued to a board; but it can just as easily be an eight foot painting on luscious velvet, slathered (albeit neatly) with creamy, multicolored oil paint.

Painting lends itself not just to historical reference and placement, but also to sensuality, to an immersion in the pleasures—guilty or not—of the visual. A long career allows sets of themes to play out as they wish, for the controlling impulse to be blunted. Bochner has said, “The past takes care of itself.” This exhibition allows us to see both a mind and a sensibility at work—engaged with ideas but willing, in the cause of a higher seriousness, to let it rip whenever the occasion calls for it. After all, how many artists could or would make a painting called “Everybody Is Full of Shit”? And (sort of) mean it.

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