

Symbols Near Collapse: Text and Meaning in Brian Prugh's Recent Work

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Maybe if you let
The false starts stand, stand in for symbols
Near collapse, or let collapsing symbolize
The little clearing loving is. Maybe then

- Ben Lerner, from *Mean Free Path*¹

The cut tulle pieces in Brian Prugh's MFA thesis exhibit *The Ocean Is What I Meant By* are the elegant culmination of a long visual engagement with written language. Text serves Prugh both as a scaffold for mark-making, and as a medium for exploring the way meaning is caught and released. The word text comes from the Latin *texere*, meaning "to weave" (hence: textile, texture) and this series plays with that close etymological kinship. Using woven netting as a material and a metaphor, Prugh's work suggest that language—and by extension art—forms a lattice for meaning that is defined as much by what slips through as by what is captured. As in Ben Lerner's poetry (from which the show's title comes), these pieces acknowledge art's inevitable failure to fully actualize the artist's intention, while suggesting that maybe it is in the slippery space between aspiration and actuality, the said and the unsayable, that we can be surprised and moved.

Prugh's past work was defined by a churning experimentation and an engagement with the titans of modern art history, with clear references to artists like Sean Scully, Lucio Fontana and Cy Twombly. He has made art from old towels, duct tape, holographic spandex, burlap, and wire. Even his works on traditional canvas are formally restless and subjected to slashes, slaps of paint, and stencils, sometimes flipped backward or left partially unstapled to hang off their stretcher bars. The work in *The Ocean is What I Meant By* is a departure.

Pared down and achromatic, this series is much subtler in its variations, yet still deeply informed by that history of experimentation. Each individual piece abides by a separate logic that generates its own mood and tempo. Together, these pieces function like musical variations on a theme. The slanting instability of *The Ocean Is What I Meant By* (3) (plate 7) is complemented by the stable horizon line of *The Ocean Is What I Meant By* (4) (plate 5), which mimics a shore-side view of calm waters, while the dramatic, triangular gashes of *The Ocean Is What I Meant By* (1) (plate 6) evoke a choppy, all-encompassing sea. *Allegro, adagio, allegro agitato*.

Layers of off-set black tulle shimmer behind white frames, refracting light in moiré patterns like those on the surface of water. The frames almost disappear on the white gallery walls. The only marks on the tulle are letters written with scissors. While most writing is done in black ink on white paper, here the work performs a near perfect reversal: the white of the wall shows through letters cut out of black cloth. The words are phantoms, both visually present and literally absent. The negative space under each sliced letter droops, flimsy and translucent, sometimes dangling out of the bounds of the frame. These tongues of letters darken the tulle beneath and from a distance appear as shadows. Through cluttered tatters of netting, Prugh's evocative, seemingly fragmentary texts oscillate between legibility and illegibility, transparency and opacity.

Prugh knows better than most that an epiphany turns into a cliché as soon as it's all spelled out. The felt reality of life is, like the ocean, too vast, incomprehensible, and dizzying to be fully mapped by language or art. Wallace Stevens writes in "The Idea of Order at Key West" of "the maker's rage to order words of the sea... And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Prugh crafts ghostly demarcations. His words are transparent, gashed open, fluttering their empty sleeves. Through fragments and false-starts, he creates a refuge from the logic and clarity that stifles imagination, as well as from the seductive and numbing over-legibility of advertising, corporate speak, and modern media. But for all of Prugh's skepticism about speaking directly, these are pieces that desperately want to communicate, to carve out "the little clearing loving is." The title's phrase is repeated insistently across the work. Like a mantra or blackboard lesson, it demands to be noticed and known.

Every word, every sentence is delimiting. Words corral meaning in their specificity, limit and narrow it. Prugh's radical desire is to cut words free and in so doing to open them up to the meanings toward which they gesture. Dissatisfied with the actual and known, his work embraces the dark matter of art and language: absence, openings, and the wall behind. This series argues that wholeness is not presence, but presence plus absence, and that meaning is made up of the said and the unsayable. A net needs its holes as much as its threads. Prugh knows he can never catch the ocean, but we can catch sight of the water through his gorgeous, generous nets.

¹Ben Lerner, *Mean Free Path* (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2010), 42.