

Samuel Jablon's Paintings

By Archie Rand

"Words are an ostentation
Their choice is made but they will not succumb.
Images keep their place."

-Nikos Stangos

"The Clarity of Distances" from Pure Reason,

* * *

(25)

(Hambone – Trad.)

Archie Shepp Version

WORD PAINTING

WORDPAINTING

-Amiri Baraka

Wise, Why's, Y's,

Theory has coaxed word usage in painting into assuming an educative role, claiming not just meaning but moral significance. Sermonizing pennants pepper curatorial A-lists as artists are bonsai clipped into philosophers, or worse, ethicists. They are told that this doesn't compromise their visual intellect, forever ruining their chances of making anything other than sycophantic propaganda. Recognition of, and agreement with, the artist's public stance is crucial to our absorption and appreciation of their art. The reward is the assumption that in acknowledging our

empathy with the message we are deemed uniquely sensitive. This highbrow populism is the equivalent of being congratulated for naming all of the nymphs in a Bouguereau.

Johanna Drucker has posited that for the Cubists physicality was the overriding concern of their language employment and that recent academically marinated critiques have misinterpreted their work.

“materialization of a new space – making space as actual, as concrete, as perceivable pictorially as the objects themselves”....“ the words are the objects and the picture is self-manifesting in its totality...”

-George Braque (on Cezanne)

The physicality of Sam Jablon’s tile-set words insists on a regard that is mutely blatant. By disguising their readability but not destroying it the exploded letters/words become both object and subject in a way that bears a distant kinship to Pollock’s drips being both identifiable and transformable. Jablon’s synaptic hieroglyphs imply that these familiar symbols live in an imaginative apparition of real space.

Orwell and Pound claimed that thought, behavior and language are linked and that the debasement of one portends cultural descent. The Dadaists fomented a revolt famously directed at language and more recently Kenny Goldsmith stated: *“If John Cage theoretically claimed that any sound can be music, then we logically must conclude that, properly framed, any language can be poetry.”* In retroactive agreement, Joan Miro’s Painting-Poem just set a new artist record at Christie’s at \$27 million. The 1925 painting has written on it what may be roughly translated as: *“the body of my brown because I love him like my cat dressed green salad like hail they stay the same.”*

Although such early appearances of asemic (contentless) writing had shock value it's conscious conceit is characterized by the shared humoring by the author and audience on the absurdity of the construct.

Now, within unexamined coordinates, Samuel Jablon's letter/word images could be passingly imagined as non-sequiturs - they are not. By his investing emotion, urgency, into his work he broaches intimacy. His paintings make a successful attempt at holding their ground as poetry. Jablon has an inherited roost, vacated by projects of Downtown and Fluxus artists whose peripheral works now appear as a foundation, on top of which, unnoticed, Jablon's work nests.

“What I do is classify the words as poetry...I simply wrote what I wrote and it later became classified”

-Ray Johnson

Frank O'Hara and the Abex painters, Joe Brainard, the George Schneeman/Ron Padgett collaborations and many others introduced into the painters' mix a poetry that was defiant or jocular but avoided the enervating contempt inherent in irony. Off in the wings, poetry was wafting into visual contention creating an almost silly, cottage industry.

Both poet and painter Samuel Jablon is an odd breed of artist - his own collaborator; a self-propagating offshoot from the domain of writer/illustrators, notably Blake - but Edward Lear, Thurber, Steinberg, Roz Chast come to mind - but so does e.e. cummings. His letters, sometimes painted rather than executed in his usual technique of tiling, claim ancestry in the alphabets of Dr. Seuss as do the formats to the typographical arrangements of Marinetti.

Unlike Wool and Prince he doesn't redirect us to the known, unlike Kruger, Weiner and Holzer he doesn't declare, unlike Basquiat and Emin he is not self-referencing, unlike Wayne White he is not smug, unlike On Kawara and Opalka he does not ask for our association with discipline. His particular brand of hysterical speech places him nearer the arc of Demuth's noble "Figure 5", Schnabel's exuberant positioning, and Johns' Buster Keaton-like lettering - both deadpan and aching. In his paintings we sense a need to communicate rather than intimidate. For all of its naughty taunts at aesthetic sophistication Jablon's work is, for lack of a better word, personal. His work fails to extricate itself from its own sincerity thereby cutting it off from comparison in motive to the work of the above-mentioned artists, sharing only a cursory appearance in the result.

Samuel Jablon is one of the first artists to embrace the laxity of language that lies steaming in the wake of the new technologies. Amputated sentences flash out of cell phones to an unperturbed generation that doesn't react to Ezra Pound's raised eyebrow.

Jablon thinks nothing of painting carefree, adorned dyslexic backward typefaces in his works. He is not uncomfortable with the most immediate twists that language is undergoing, with furious velocity, and yet his response in kind, as currently viable as it appears, secretes a sentiment that compromises mere brashness. There is a dichotomy between his desire to have the words read as meaningful sound bytes and his disregard for anything but the viewers' recognition that these are in fact words and letters. He knows that from a digital perspective these revered blocks of language would be disposable, irrelevant and capable of evaporating.

The story is told of Ken Kesey and Jack Kerouac writing poems on a bus and throwing them out the window laughingly asking each other if they thought any of them were any good.

Jablon's paintings have their roots more in the artists' improvisational character than in the didacticism of post-MFA overachievers.

His use of tile, a construction material, hints at its function on a wall or floor. These are materials that Surrealist, Alfonso Ossorio, would have found pleasant and one can insert another allusion to Ossorio's friend, Pollock, about the horizontal being made vertical. Bits of tile and shards of mirror reflect dumbly back only to force the viewer to concede that there are words in this mural that are in the throws of atomization and must be continually re-coagulated to avoid entropy. It takes a while. The viewer reclaims the notion of conversation that has been shuffled under the deck in an age where instant recognition is valued. After all, what isn't immediately comprehensible makes us uncomfortable. It would help to realize that Jablon's paintings shouldn't be parsed to their elements but taken in one gulp, whole.

In Jablon's work each tile placement represents a caring from a larger, unseen matrix. Each handful of speech on each support is a fragment of an ode awaiting annealment. There is something eerily religious about all this if one feels that a mystic is a person who thinks that the discord and contradiction in the world conceals a hidden unity. As his paintings refuse to show his hand we are seduced into activating our mystical side because of a hard-wired reflex that tells us paintings are "true".

Hanuman found the Brahma, creator of the universe, crying and Hanuman asked the reason why. Brahma said. "I dropped the jewel of wisdom and it broke into countless of pieces. I cry because everyone finding a piece of the jewel of wisdom believes he has the only piece."

In another book Rama describes Hanuman as the ablest sentence maker.

Samuel Jablon presents us with a broken piece of knowledge. A yelp devoid of context, knowing, like Carlo Ginzburg, that a complete history can be reconstructed from a fragment if enough empathy and relevant variables are employed. This is the nature of the exchange that is generated by Jablon's work. The humility of the literary objective is not crippled by any parallel shyness of presentation. The voice, enfeebled by its scattering, still attempts to announce, brandishing its snippet of parchment imbedded in the confusion. Unlike the conceptual users of language Jablon is aware that the human condition is too fluid for it to mobilize under a banner of well-meant ideology.

Franz Kline famously said to Frank O'Hara, *"painting has nothing to do with knowing – it has to do with giving."*

Jablon writes. He channels. He is not an ideologue. The Mishnah says: *"Acquire a friend for yourself"*. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef said that the word "acquire" could also be read as "a reed pen" by which he meant that writing can be your friend as writing forces one to clarify the subject. It is impossible not to want to read Jablon's words and re-read and re-read them. Our deductive capacity is blocked. When we press our ear against the wall - there is a faint song.

Jablon has no slogans, only sputtered gasps that we visit as if it were archeology. The viewer forgets what he/she knows and tries to ascertain what the painting knew...at one time. The paintings still harbor the key to their own resuscitation if only we can find it. There is certainly enough information. As viewers we become Roy Chapman Andrews, a child's curiosity and faith becoming the only tools that will get us through. The paintings seem as artifacts, neatly preserved as their reassembled words form cryptic phrases that rise and submerge. Gamboling on the intact, gratefully surviving grids, the words, when considered together, may appear as disorderly confluences of the past half-century of squabbling visual languages.

In Tolstoy's "Kholstomer", a horse observes, *"the human species is guided, above all, by words"*.

In Jablon's paintings Al Held, Beatrice Milhazes, Jean Fautrier, Cy Twombly, Antoni Tapies, Alfred Jensen, Irene Rice Pereira, Jack Youngerman, Georges Matthieu, Shirley Jaffe all dutifully report for line-up as "background" characters. They show up, rankless, shoulder-to-shoulder, nonchalantly. A motley crowd of resurrected ghosts, they appear under their orders to host these unruly ciphers that they know will totally mess up their plot. There is no grumbling - they are resigned to their charge as the letters skitter, flip, inflate, Bronx-cheer, hide and then revert to tiles or paint. By now, we are too exhausted to exhume the pieces and accord them status. We relent and accept the incongruous inmates. And we are relieved. When we view Jablon's paintings we feel that we have simply interrupted their metamorphosis. We peruse the whole scene without dissecting. As in Domenico Tiepolo's Punchinello Drawings, all of the elements know more than we do. They will acquiesce to stand still, temporarily balancing, for our scrutiny.

The abstract formats Jablon employs would be competent abstraction in any arena but under pressure from the whining texts the visual tactics recede, becoming merely intelligent formats. Obliquely but unsettlingly, this gives the lie to much contemporary abstraction. Jablon suggests, by his overscript, that it offers us insufficient nutrition after our dutiful recognition of one of the multiple-choice approaches. The viewer is faced with the embarrassing realization that much abstraction has become reproducible stylistic merchandise, devoid of the passion that generated its initial forays. Passion is messy and unstylish. Self-indulgent, it has become disreputable. Jablon's paintings retaliate against a tired, reliably self-righteous coolness that sits reigning, insuring both the artist and viewer against the risk of meditative interaction or any accusations of bombast.

“Abstraction is a part of idealism. It is in that sense that it is ugly.”

– Wallace Stevens

From this spot, if we use a larger net, we can't discount three of Jablon's texts that can be stretched to include a swipe at Greenberg:

UGLY

IT'S A UGLY TIME

DON'T GET STAINED IT'S UGLY OUT THERE

The comforting playfulness of positioning, texture and color negates the arduous decoding of the texts assuring the visitor of not being bullied. But it is a trek, re-piecing each letter. The sparse phrases shift in and out of focus and, for security, their

deciphering is deposited in our short term memory, which names the piece but still places it at some remove from having a narrative relationship with the visual artifact.

Tiles add unexpected light refraction and facture to the plane. They have dimension. They are hard and glossy - imported into a clubbier format that chafes at their air of egalitarian innocence if not privilege. Preening their unearned, overt situating, devoid of pedigree, the tiles perch on a skin of art and demand integration. The tiles bring with them an alliance. A power:

“Can you not hear, can you not taste, can you not smell words, can you not touch – words?”

-William Carlos Williams

Objects have been attached to paintings, famously by the Cubists and Constructivists and more recently (among others) by Larry Poons, Joan Snyder and Joe Zucker but in most cases the projections were reinforcing elements submerged into, and not placed counter to, the aesthetics of the painting.

As the tiles are not set parallel to the support their use recalls mosaic murals. As such, the gravity of history and the permanence of intentional installation are added to our subconscious perception. By setting them in faux-mosaic they emulate a trope that freezes them in a simulation of the stationary, the architectural, and shoves in a reserve association with the reverential.

The space between the tiles appears to be the result of the surface having suffered aging, leaving us with this snatched or salvaged stuttering, wondering how the entire text may have read when intact. The letters taunt dissolution and reconfiguration

daring to us to activate a yearning. To facilitate the impression of the familiar many of Jablon's works are of intimate scale – the scale at which one may read. These paintings are holdable, book-cover sized but the strolling gallery-goer just can't place having had a previous rapport with these paintings.

The tiles' spatial assignments and the sizes of the letters inconsistently accent parts of the words to further offset, and even counteract, the underlying logic of the painting. The words, and the objects of which they are made, stare back dopily, claiming squatters' rights:

BOOTLEG is a black painting with hilarious 10th Street splashes of day-glo red. Stendhal's Red and Black are stymied by the incoherence.

***“Yet silently red clouds, in which a wrathful god lives,
Gather on willow-ground
The blood that was shed, moon-coolness;
All roads flow in black decay.”***

-Georg Trakl, “Grodek”

Its kitschyness belies that it is a crazy painting. The tile placement (as in the big B in BOOTLEG) unbalances other parts of the word upsetting any effort at customary design. The “T” is under “BOO” and reading left to right “LEG” is written upside down. We are witnessing a controlled anarchy. It is joy.

Jablon is theoretically savvy and has claimed his right to throw it all in the trash by enlisting invitations from sources that are primary to the studious reception of the paintings. He does end-runs around Deleuze whose dry *“separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another”* is sabotaged by an adamant

goofiness that makes foolish such extrapolated intentions as “*organizing the metaphysical flux*”.

While there is a blatant ascetic fatalism in Jablon’s texts the clinician’s notion of “*organizing the metaphysical flux*” seems a silly and irrelevant jacket to which the romantic mahlerishness of his paintings refuses to subscribe.

There is a darkness in the texts that is sealed off from any whiff of optimism. His paintings’ fronting of a light-heartedness is accompanied by an earnestness. However, this is countered by a reverse transubstantiation that occurs as the flesh becomes the word - linking his accomplishment to Kenneth Anger’s filmic visions where the protagonists (Jablon’s words) turn against character and form (the composition), and inevitably, but barely, dominate:

YAH YAH YAAA HAY AH GET DIRTY

The Rolling Stones’ “Get Yer Ya-Ya’s Out!” merges with Outkast’s “Hey Ya” and is added to “get dirty”, which is a biker’s phrase, the title of a parental advisory cd, the ad line for a chicken take-out joint, and the slogan of many volunteer gardening groups.

UNFINGERED RECKLESSNESS - the word finger doesn’t appear in writing as often as it does in speech. First, you can make the rude gesture - so in these words the referred to “recklessness” remains unaddressed. There’s Homer’s “rosy-fingered dawn” but more often “finger” is verbal: The Beatles’ concocted “fish and finger pie”- so to be “unfingered” would be virginal. Then there’s to “finger”, as in to nab, or point blame, therefore “unfingered” could mean “blameless”. Then again, “Three-finger Brown” was the name awarded to gangster assassin Tommy Lucchese (after the nickname of legendary pitcher Mordecai Brown).

Sidling up to conceptualism we are cordoned-off from deducing any unified purpose in the figure/ground relationship. Because the tiles are raised we read over the painting as if it were a rubbing from a tombstone - all the while desiring entrance to the relief of illusion promised by an underlying abstraction, whose composition has been crippled by the letters that randomly deface and claim ownership over what would appear to be the painting. The structure, the equilibrium, temporarily fizzles. Concurrently there exists a substantial menu of visual recall as a late deKooning brushstroke indiscriminately bunks with a Lily Van der Stokker floral letter.

In 8th century China, Zheng Qian's work was called by the emperor "The Three Perfections" referring to his mastery in painting, poetry and calligraphy. Achieving "The Three Perfections" was considered the supreme accomplishment, as there is a tense interplay between reading and simultaneously digesting an image. Each character's form inhabits meaning whose individual voice and surrounding space then inflects, in combination, the reading of the larger poem. In the ninth century it was stated that "painting and writing have different names but a common body."

Paradoxically, because we are reading across we can't read through. Individual letters lackadaisically come front and center providing negligible advance for our understanding of their neighbors. The written message that we finally, limply, comprehend offers a replacement, a literary entrance, standing-in for the illusionistic penetration that we expect paintings to provide.

The letters of the poetry are recognized as emerging from the painting and then they plunge back into the surface. Letter shapes we perceive by the forced congealing of elements are almost irrelevant as carriers of meaning and the poems, words, when deciphered give one pause but no resolution. One of his texts reads: **OBLITERATE AND REFORM**. The letters hesitate, dissolve back into the pictures and reappear.

A classic Hasidic tale speaks of a Jewish soldier who, in fatigue and desperation, stumbles into a synagogue. Sitting alone in the pews he is observed by the rabbi who watches as the soldier continually recites the alphabet - over and over again. Finally, the rabbi confronts him and asks what he is doing and the soldier explains that he never went to school and is illiterate. All he knows is the alphabet. He tells the rabbi that he wanted to pray but since he couldn't read he recited the only Hebrew that he knew: the alphabet. The man then told the rabbi, "The Holy One knows what is in my heart. I will offer up the letters, and in Heaven the words can be put together."

X X X X
X X X
X X X

could be something so taboo - or a schematic for his own typography.

The brain reels, scratching for a connection as almost recent idioms rise up and throw us to where recall is dim, irretrievable, or hopeless. The promise that the phrases will reinstate, return to tether us to the text's veracity, even necessity, again, presses an unwanted shamanistic button. Interestingly, many of Jablon's

caption references can be traced to hit song locations in the 1970's and 80's, which must have resonance for him as they would be things he heard in infancy, further vouching for the authenticity of his reports.

His titles are usually about escape but are presented with breathless anticipation. Jablon will duplicate words as in the baseball announcer's recurring: **GOING GOING GOING** or quote Nike's current ad copy as well as the refrain from Archie Bell and the Drells' "Tighten Up", **DO IT. ALL WE NEED IS TO FORGET** could be a take-off after The Beatles' "All you need is love." **THE WORST HAS HAPPENED** recalls the Jimmy Webb song "The Worst That Could Happen" sung by the Fifth Dimension and Johnny Maestro and the Brooklyn Bridge. **EVERYTHING NOTHING** and **THINK TANKS** – could be a warning against over-intellectualization.

ONE LOST VOICE COMING OUT OF DIRT

Lost Voice: Google Play Description

This application allows you to enter any text you want, and have it speak the text outloud using the phone's text to speech capabilities. You are able to save common options for easy use, incase you say need to say the same thing frequently. Useful when you lose your voice and need some way to communicate with people.

Wiktionary states:

“Let’s is always inclusive, which refers to both the speaker and the addressee, while let us is commonly exclusive, which refers only to the speaker.”-

In the painting **LET'S GET NOWHERE** the mirror inset into the impasto acts as a star in the sky of a sgraffitoed, mud-encrusted late Rothko, inducing the illusion of landscape. The words, maintain equality as a visual component demanding existence on another plane of mental receipt, forming a simultaneity that is unusual in a painting. In Jablon's paintings the words are not featured as instructions or symbols but blithely reside as essential elements that, oddly, insist upon the attempt of their being comprehended and even understood. These literary insertions act more like cartoon word bubbles separated from their comic strip panels but are repatriated here as intrinsic ingredients of the unappeased painting. The tiles, too, are insertions. There is a constant jostling.

Just short of appointing approved translations of Jablon's words stands a barrage of unasked-for suggestions that buttress the persistence of our most unwitting responses and reflexive comparisons. A Rorschach test for eroding cultural trivia.

The exercise of jousting with his work is compounded as he often begins with the imperative voice, "come" or "let's", which adds character to his words, supporting the idea that we are not looking at purposefully irrational language. His texts want to reach us and spawn a subliminal recognition:

COME ON LET'S GET NOWHERE

***"Come into the garden Maud
For the black bat, night, has flown,"***
- Tennyson

***"Come away, my love! Be like a gazelle or a young stag
on the mountains of spices"***
- Song of Solomon 8:14

“Come as you are, tarry not over your toilet”.

- Rabindranath Tagore

In what seems like Ralph Kramden preparing with Ed Norton for the \$64,000 Challenge a litany of song references could be strung after the prompts of Jablon’s titles.

“Let's Get Lost” was the name of a documentary on the depressing life of West Coast trumpeter Chet Baker who played and sang the title tune, a song by McHugh and Loesser and notably recorded by Sinatra. It also serves as the title of songs by G-Eazy, Beck, Elliott Smith, the Belgian Zappa-influenced band Deus, and is the title of a 1997 Danish film and a novel by Sarra Manning.

The above title also riffs with another Jablon caption that uses an obscure but recognized word found in the title of an 80’s TV show: **GONNA GET ELSEWHERE**

Lyrics to "So Let's Go Nowhere" by the punk band The Arrogant Sons of Bitches include “ everything is always falling apart”; The Mountain Goats sing, “It's all coming apart again”; Coheed and Cambria sing, “It’s all coming apart”. Jablon paints: **KEEP OUT IT’S ALL COMING APART.**

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING SAY SOMETHING SAY SAY SAY SOMETHING SOMETHING SAY IF YOU

This post-9/11 directive is reshaped into a hip-hop/techno skipping LP. It brings up Paul McCartney & Michael Jackson’s “Say, Say, Say” and the repetition of, for instance, Otis Redding’s “Try a little tenderness” - “GOT-to, GOT-to, GOT-to. Sophocles’

Ajax: says, " O pan, Pan! O Pan! O Pan! Be seized by the waves...."
and in Mescaline Allen Ginsberg writes: "***I want to know
I want I want ridiculous to know to know....***"

TANGLED CAUGHT STUCK COVER ME GLITTERINGLY

Takes a word from Dylan's offering to Joni Mitchell "tangled up in blue" and Ginsberg's line from Plutonian Ode, "Shining Diamonds & Sequins glitter", which also serves the dual purpose of referencing Jablon's materials of choice.

NO LOOKING BACK COME ON! – Bob Dylan, Tears For Fears, **LIVE ROUND AND ROUND** – (live rounds – ammo?) wheels on the bus, Chuck Berry, Perry Como? **ON AND ON** – Stephen Bishop, Erykah Badu and at least 26 other performers? **BURNED MY CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS BUT WHAT A FUCKING LIFE (upside down) AND THAT'S IN THE DARK WHERE THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO LIVE BABY**

The immediate source of the last part of this text is "First Fig" by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

***"My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!"***

Has "fig" been made the pun from where "What a fucking life" derives? Is the upside down placement of "that's in the dark" an illustration of a sexual position? "In the Dark", an album by the Grateful Dead, "Dancing in the Dark", a Springsteen song, the Dietz and Schwartz standard "Dancing in the Dark" and Sammy Hagar's "There's Only One Way To Rock" are all tucked somewhere in our heads.

He fesses up to appropriating in lettering the word: **LOOT**. One of his texts references **ECHOES** testifying to an intent to evoke.

He presents an homage to the Beckettian chestnut:

MUST GO ON –

CANT GO ON

MUST GO ON-

CANT GO ON

MUST CANT

GO MUST GO

CANT GO ON

MUST GO ON

CANT GO ON

I’LL GO ON

While all such far-fetched conjecture could just be plain wrong Jablon litters hints that tantalizingly cover the surface of unplumbed waters. For all of their bravado and mental calisthenics the paintings finally retire as fun. Reveling in boisterous gratitude for your indulgence they enjoy being revisited. Displaying their freedom.

Oscar Wilde said that, *“the trouble with being understood is that they find you out.”* Samuel Jablon spools out an invitation for dialogue, composed of real memory, asking the viewer to partake in the unfamiliar and, together, try to reach an understanding, some common ground, which will lead us from out of the complacent.