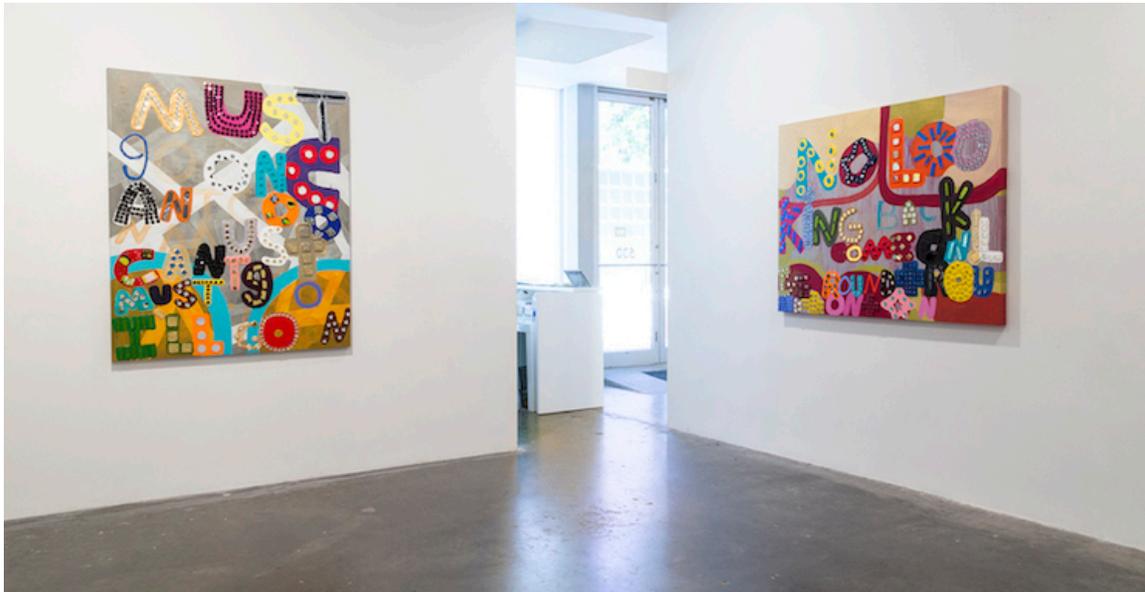


Words and Meanings: An interview with Samuel Jablon



Samuel Jablon: WORD:PLAY at Freight + Volume, New York, NY. Photo by Jeffrey Rose

By **JEFF GRUNTHANER**, SEPT. 2014

Words and their meanings are inherently temporal. Sentences unfold as words join to words, each influencing the sense of the others as more and more gather to form the overall completion of a thought. Coupled with this, language is designedly a response to absence. Something has been overlooked: what hasn't been said? In this manner, words serve to draw our attention to the covert aspects of the world around us: they indicate, point out, habitually filling in the gaps of our experience with the drywall of metaphor. Such observations on the pragmatic utility of language are especially relevant when one considers how words become possessed of a tactile materiality in the pictorial poems of Samuel Jablon.

In Jablon's pictures, language doesn't signify so much as it exclaims, enacts. Jablon's art renders words physical—at once expressive, pictorial, and sculptural. The minutia of phrasing he puts into play ("Desire. Sluttony. Lust. Always Right," for instance, or "Let's Go Nowhere") under the relational coherence of grammar from its everyday conventions and translate words into experiences as opposed to codified signifiers. Confronting his pictures for the first time, viewers might linger to search for the familiar meanings that words once held, only to have to discover them anew.

Jablon's art quite literally incorporates the phrasal aspects of poetry—at times using quotes from canonical writers, such as Frank O'Hara or Samuel Beckett—without conceding to the "on the page" linearity that written language tends to follow. It's as though absorption in the spectacle of language become hyper-graphic has created a new prospect of poetic textuality—words can now inhabit the space intuited by the body as distinguished from the representational space reserved for works on canvas. Following a recent studio visit, I decided to ask Jablon about how his practice has developed, the insights guiding it, and the relationship between language and art.

Jeff Grunthaler: How did you come to make "word art"?

Samuel Jablon: I have always had an affection and affiliation towards poetry. My undergraduate degree is from Naropa University, where I studied poetry with the Beats who are still kicking around, a member of The Fugs, and people like Amiri Baraka... I more or less started off with words. I went to Brooklyn College for my MFA in visual art to figure out how to take poetry somewhere. I knew Vito Acconci taught at BC, and that he started off as a fiction writer. We had a lot of conversations on how to move away from "poetry", as in poetry on the page, and take it into something else. So I decided to inject poetry into paintings, and I started doing guerrilla performances and interventions in spaces that were not necessarily part of the poetry circuit.

JG: How do your paintings relate to your performance work?

SJ: The text from the paintings often ends up in a performance and vice versa. *The Poet Sculpture* is a project that encompassed the different elements of my practice. It is a sculpture that I dedicated to Julia de Burgos, Jayne Cortez, ee cummings, Allen Ginsberg, Barbara Guest, Langston Hughes, Tuli Kupferberg, Taylor Mead, Frank O'Hara, and Pedro Pietri. I made a soapbox for each poet that is painted and covered in their poetry. Then living poets are invited to perform the sculpture. They physically interact with the structure to create and manipulate a visual poem/sculpture while performing their work.

JG: Describe the genesis of a particular painting.

SJ: The paintings all start off very differently. I do not have a set way of working. Sometimes the text comes first, other times the painting does. Usually whatever plan I start off with is completely lost by the end of the painting. It becomes its own thing in a way. That is what excites me about what I am doing. There are moments where I have no idea what I am going to do next, and the process guides the work. I started the painting *Nowhere Bus* after writing the text:

No Looking Back Come ON! Live Round and Round and On and On

After I had the text I painted the letters onto the panel in a way that made it readable, but difficult. Then over several months I built up the surface with paint, mirror, glass tile, and fused glass. I kept building up the surfaces until the letters really became forms and the meaning or definition of the words slipped away.

JG: You use a lot of reflective materials in your paintings. Does this in any way relate your use of language?

SJ: Yeah, it does relate to my use of language, but not the words; it's more related to the materiality of the paintings. There are a couple of things going on with my choice of materials. For one, my family owns a glass tile company, and I have access to kilns to create the pieces of fused glass I use. Using this material is second nature to me. It's something I have always been around. I started using reflective material because of the way it captures everything in the room including the viewer and brings it all into the painting. It gives everything a glimmer and makes the work less readable.



Poet Sculpture, PULSE Art Fair 2014, Steve Dalachinsky, New York, NY

JG: Why make language less readable? Why not go the route of Jenny Holzer or Lawrence Weiner and make statements that are clear to read, regardless of the materials used?

SJ: That's a good question. Holzer and Weiner both declare things in their work, and I think their work needs to be clear and concise. I am not that interested in making declarations. I found when I first started making the work I am now making that people actually stopped and stayed with the work for significant amount of time. If a painting can hold someone's attention then I tend to find it successful. People wanted to know what the painting said, what was hidden. If you spend enough time with the work it will reveal itself. It is all there in plain sight, but it is also about painting, and I do not think painting needs to be readable.

JG: Does a particular word or phrase affect your choice of pallet?

SJ: My pallets of choice are old iced coffee cups that can hold a lot of paint. Words or phrases do not affect my choice of color. My color choice derives more from an instinct and a reaction to an element I just added to the painting. It is more of a gut reaction than anything.

JG: Given your use of language, do you work serially, as though composing a sonnet sequence, or do you work on a particular piece in isolation?

SJ: I work on several pieces at once. My studio is usually filled with paintings in progress. The work definitely influences the work around it, but I find each piece to be complete and singular. I have made lots of small paintings to hang as a cluster. Once you put words together on a wall they relate to each other, you can read across and around the cluster, and you are able to engage with a single painting.



Beckett, 2014, Acrylic, glass tile, mirror, fused glass, 24k gold tile on wood, 62 x 52 inches

Samuel Jablon: *WORD:PLAY* is on view at Freight and Volume (530 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through September 27th