

Secret Power of Synonyms. Mel Bochner Turns Up the Volume in “Strong Language”

Words have been the subjects and primary constituents of the enigmatic yet acerbically provocative paintings Mel Bochner has been creating over the past 12 years. “Mel Bochner: Strong Language,” an elegantly produced exhibition at the Jewish Museum, gives them their due and traces their roots back to text-based works that Mr. Bochner created in the '60s and early '70s, when he was one of New York's pre-eminent Conceptual artists.



Mel Bochner, *Installation View; Strong Languages*. 2014. Image courtesy of Ozier Muhammad

Mr. Bochner wasn't alone in his preoccupation with language then. Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and many other avant-gardists at the time made word art. Also, like Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Smithson, Mr. Bochner wrote critical and theoretical essays with a rigorous, analytic fervor determined to extinguish sloppy, sentimental thinking and writing about art.

The new paintings still revolve around philosophical issues that were dear to the Minimalists and the Conceptualists of the '60s. The way they flip viewers back and forth between seeing visual forms and reading verbal texts prompts rumination about different modes of perceptual and cognitive consciousness.

They feature lists of synonyms, many gleaned from Roget's Thesaurus, and often colloquial and vulgar ones. While some are made with a brushy touch, others are neatly lettered in juicy colors and in horizontal rows on flat, colored backgrounds, like Modernist stripe paintings. “Crazy” (2005) offers more than three dozen synonymous words and phrases in rows filling a 5-by-6 1/2-foot brown rectangle, with each word a different color. The list begins with “crazy,” continues with “nutty,” “daffy,” “dippy,” “dizzy” and “loopy” and ends with “foaming at the mouth.” “Die,” also from 2005, runs from “decease,” “expire,” “perish,” “succumb” to “push up daisies” and “sink into oblivion.”

Almost every painting is devoted to more or less negative words, as indicated by titles like “Nothing” (2003), “Useless” (2005), “Contempt” (2005) and “Obscene” (2006). An especially unsettling one is “Jew” (2008), which lists anti-Semitic labels in impulsively printed yellow letters on a brushy gray and black background, colors that pointedly evoke those of the Star of David armbands that the Nazis forced European Jews to wear. (Mr. Bochner, born in 1940, grew up in an observant Jewish household.) More lighthearted, though also rendered in yellow on black, is “The Joys of Yiddish” (2006), where you find words like “nudnick,” “nebbish,” “schmooser” and “schlemiel.”

There's an accusatory feeling in some pieces. One made of brushy white letters on a dark brown ground begins with “Liar,” “prevaricator,” “fabulator,” “dissembler,” “deceiver,” “hypocrite.” Who is addressed by these names, you might wonder? Am I the accused? “Silence!” “Cool it!” “Gag it!” “Swallow it!” commands one of the show's biggest paintings — it's 10 feet wide — in neat, cheerfully colored letters, as if to cut short your protestations of innocence. Several paintings say only, “Blah blah blah blah,” sarcastically reflecting, presumably, the sort of empty blather produced by advertisers, politicians, government bureaucrats, talk show personalities, journalists, pundits, bloggers and art critics.

The exhibition, which was organized by Norman Kleeblatt, the museum's chief curator, also includes a selection of Mr. Bochner's word-based works from the 1960s and '70s. Among these is a series of small verbal portraits of other artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Dan Flavin and Eva Hesse, made of letters and words composed in configurations that formally reflect the subject's art. "Portrait of Eva Hesse" (1966) has words like "wrap-up," "secrete," "cloak," "bury" and "obscure" inked in concentric circles, mimicking the circular forms of some of Hesse's sculptures.

But the newer paintings have a visual and affective impact that Conceptual art of the '60s and '70s rarely had. Far from coolly analytic, they're hotly assertive, charged it seems with crotchety indignation and furious exasperation. And therein lies the crux: What are they so worked up about? It's hard to say.

Taken one at a time, the paintings are lushly sensuous and bracingly punchy, but seeing many of them together is enervating. The volume is always turned way up; you feel as if you were being yelled at by a word-mad autistic savant. Styles and techniques may vary — some recent pieces have letters with the thickness of cake frosting applied to velvet — but the format of listed words, forcing you repeatedly to read left to right, and top to bottom, enhances a bullying effect.

At the same time, it seems that some of the paintings are mocking themselves. With "Babble" (2011), which begins with "babble," "blather," "blabber" and ends with "ad nauseum" (the painting spells it this way), it's as if it were making fun of its own logorrhea. As with the blah blah paintings, there's a hint that the artist himself might be wrestling with some kind of inner conflict, possibly between his imaginative, creative self and his skeptical, critical self. It's hard to say for sure, though. The paintings are resolutely impersonal.

In this regard, a Conceptual piece from 1970 that Mr. Bochner has recreated for the exhibition is worth considering. Irregular letters chalked on a black background painted directly on the wall state, "Language is not transparent." This might be true literally, if it makes any sense at all. Taken metaphorically it's debatable. We do speak of some writings as clear and others as impenetrable. Reading Tolstoy you can feel as if you were "seeing through" the words on the page to the characters, landscapes and events they describe. Paintings often are metaphorically transparent, too; they can be like windows onto other worlds or into the depths of an artist's psyche.

But that sort of transparency is not to be found in Mr. Bochner's paintings. They are adamantly opaque, both literally and metaphorically. Whatever psychological dynamic animates them is hidden behind their optically aggressive and verbally peevish surfaces. It's frustrating. You suspect that there's something deeper activating them, something that would explain their splenetic moods, but you don't know what it is. What's he repressing?

As if sensing such questions might be on viewers' minds, one of the last works in the show demands in loosely written white letters on a small, silver-painted canvas, "Do I have to draw you a picture?" As if you were an idiot for asking. You might want to say: "Well, sure, maybe a picture would help. Maybe all those words are just getting in the way."