Mel Bochner

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON
Nicholas Cullinan

MEL BOCHNER, heir to Henri Matisse? This seemed to be the surprising thesis put forward by curator Achim Boeche and Hartmut Hume in their exhilarating exhibition of more than four decades of the renowned Conceptualist’s work at the Whitechapel Gallery (remotely, the artist’s first survey to be staged in the UK). Not only were Bochner’s art works to the master colorist of modernism highlighted in the accompanying catalogue, and Bochner’s paintings privileged over his earlier sculptures, drawings, photographs, and measurement pieces that make democratic use of the gallery space, but the exhibition also emphatically sought to reframe Bochner’s work via his interest in color as much as in language, and to explore how the two intertwined in his art through a shared tension between abstraction and representation.

Emblematic of this curatorial focus was the wall of words the visitor first encountered in the gallery’s space. Occupying the entire visual field of the entrance, Bochner’s vast painting Blah, Blah, Blah, 2011, consists of cloths and smeared multicolored lettered bands, rendered in the standardized font of a sign painter, spilling out the titular phrase forty times over in oil paint on a support of ten black velvet panels. The cumulative effect of the repeated word and the tension between the hues intermingling in Bochner’s rainbow palette (resembling Pop silk screens) is undeniably mesmeric and eye-catching. Yet surely the choice of such a banal and cliché-like phrase complicated the exhibition’s “exploration of communication and meaning in language” (as the accompanying wall label indicated somewhat needlessly), which was supposedly encapsulated by this opening gambit. Rather, as this painting announced, a quick sense of humor was palpably present on every wall of the exhibition, in Bochner’s various engagements with the anxiety of art historical influence—and by extension criticism—through his deliberate provocations and misgivings. This is made manifest not only in his musing “Blah, Blah, Blah” (paintings, 2010–), but also in the mischievously falsified quotes contained in Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography), 1967–70, in which aphorisms on the photographic medium by such figures as Marcel Duchamp and Emile Zola are undermined by the insertion of a few forged statements (Bochner has steadfastly refused to reveal which these are).

Most vividly, this focused show left the work’s past the two broad categories of color and language in order to consider their constituent parts, including medium specificity, texture, and tautology. Throughout Bochner’s career, he has intrinsically wedded concept to facture, and the resulting physical objects are more than mere carriers of ideas. This is evident in the twelve color photographs of Transparence and Opales, 1968/2008, with Vaseline, and, separately, shaving foam transmitting varying degrees of light and layer to the camera’s lens; in the ninety-two-foot stretch of Event Horizon, 1998, in which the artist’s wall measurements are transferred onto eighty-three monochrome panels of various standard sizes and colors; and in more recent pieces, such as the smeared-white paint on white velvet Silence, 2012. Material concerns also trump historical reference when it comes to color: Bochner is less interested in the equation of silence with blankness (as put forward in discourses around Robert Rauschenberg’s famed White Paintings from 1951, which famously served as inspiration for John Cage’s “silent” performance 4’33”), or even the elevation of language, than in language’s often jolting degradation. Thus, in Silence, as in many of Bochner’s latest “thesaurus paintings,” 2002–, we witness a deteriorating (or increasingly crude) use of language ranging from the opening ephemeral imperative to zip it, to finally, and most coarsely, just shut the fuck up! The visual proximity of the creamy oil paint and the off-white velvet ground only serves to highlight the range of linguistic registers deployed and the resulting elision of word and image, viewing and reading.

Another crucial aspect foregrounded by the exhibition, befitting perhaps the central preoccupation of Bochner’s career, is the seeming impossibility of thought existing outside language, or without being encoded and conveyed within it. This was made clear by a 1970 wall drawing that greeted the viewer at the top of the stairs to the second floor, No Thought Exists Without a Sustaining Support, where the fictive blackboard on which this phrase is scrawled in chalk appears to dissolve and drip down the wall. While this work might initially seem to have little to do with the show’s curatorial focus, the chromatic range utilized in the art on display was matched only by the different mediums in which Bochner has deployed these colors, and subsequently our way of viewing the artist’s investigations was recalibrated.

“If the Colour Changes” was densely hung (one might say overhung), which had the effect, despite Bochner’s rigorous philosophical grounding, of making his works and the ideas contained within them appear curiously breathless and fugitive. This false impression was immediately rectified by the inclusion of four of Bochner’s lucid texts in the very good accompanying catalogue. However, through Bochner’s career, he has intrinsically wedded concept to facture, and the resulting physical objects are more than mere carriers of ideas.

Although all interesting, the five thematic and occasionally overlapping essays by Boeche and Hume and his exhibition collaborators Ulrich Wilmes and Jako Fernandez, as well as Bronya Ferr and Mark Godfrey didn’t particularly help to illuminate the works included in Whitechapel, or, by extension, the specific rereading of Bochner’s career underpinning the entire enterprise. Individual entries, or at least expanded captions accompanying the catalogue’s reproductions, would have aided the show’s thesis concerning the parallel development of form and content in Bochner’s oeuvre, which was otherwise so handsomely laid out. The Wittgenstein quotation that served as the exhibition’s title (and the title of a painting in it) flags the adroit way in which Bochner has always balanced the pragmatic with the phenomenological in his materials—treating hue not as a unified concept but as mutable, contingent on naming, seeing, texturing—and helps position him among the most compelling colors of our age. 

Travels to the Land of Know, Namur, May 7–June 23.
NICHOLAS CULLINAN IS CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK.