

Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes



Mel Bochner: If the Colour Changes Whitechapel Gallery
 12th October 2012 - 30th December 2012

"The better part of my work on media is actually somewhat like a safe-cracker's. I don't know what's inside; maybe it's nothing. I just sit down and start to work. I grope, I listen, I test, I accept and discard; I try out different sequences — until the tumblers fall and the doors spring open."⁽¹⁾ This quote, that could so easily be attributed to Mel Bochner, is in actual fact an extract from an interview with Marshall McLuhan conducted by Playboy in 1969.

In his show 'If the Colour Changes' at Whitechapel Gallery Bochner delivers a similarly inquiring approach to critical theory, albeit this results in more of a retrospective on truths (be them established or ephemeral) as opposed to an investigation in search of them. He adopts McLuhan's trial and error process without even a want or a need for the tumblers to fall and doors to open.

In '36 Photographs and Twelve Diagrams (1966)' in Gallery 1, Bochner depicts a series of sculptural arrangements photographed at three separate viewpoints (plan, elevation and corner perspective), which are then accompanied by grids detailing their layout and composition. The seriality at play delivers a commentary on the methodology of sculptural composition, pertaining to the fact that Bochner's intent is not to make sculpture, rather, to comment on the process.

He tackles the conventions of abstract painting with similar scrutiny in 'Theory of Painting' (1969-70) which consumes; somewhat facetiously given the medium and its close proximity to his aforementioned wall mounted take on sculpture; a large proportion of the floor space in Gallery 1. Spray-painted newsprint is arranged into four sections, capturing in ingenious simplicity the rules of abstraction: coherent figure on coherent ground, coherent figure on dispersed ground, dispersed figure on coherent ground, and dispersed figure on dispersed ground.

There is however a definite sense of segmentation as you move out of Gallery 1 and into Gallery 9, upon which a thorough dissection of theory on delivery systems deposits you neatly into Gallery 8 where a vivid inoculation of colour and text occurs. Language, both formal and colloquial, is exposed in its glorious absurdity in paint on canvas. Neologisms, superlatives, figures of speech and "Blah's", assail the viewer in a

literary attack on the senses, that in spite of it's vibrancy still retains that element of control and deliberation that is ever present in Bochner's work. It is in fact this systematic exactness of his approach that ties this body of work neatly together. Yes, his theorem exploration is at times random and inclusive, however his interest in all that is rational is evident throughout.

Don't be fooled though into thinking that this systematic approach is without trace of its own sensory perception. There is a definite sense of subjectivity at play, and one can't help but pick up on a paradoxical disdain for each of the theories he examines and the mediums he exploits. It therefore seems somewhat appropriate that 'Blah Blah Blah' (2011) figureheads the press coverage for this touring exhibition. After all, on the arduous journey to truth isn't there always a degree of "claptrap" to sift through?

1. The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, Playboy Magazine (March 1969)