Frieze
'Mel Bochner: National Gallery of Art'
January-February 2012, p.156

USA

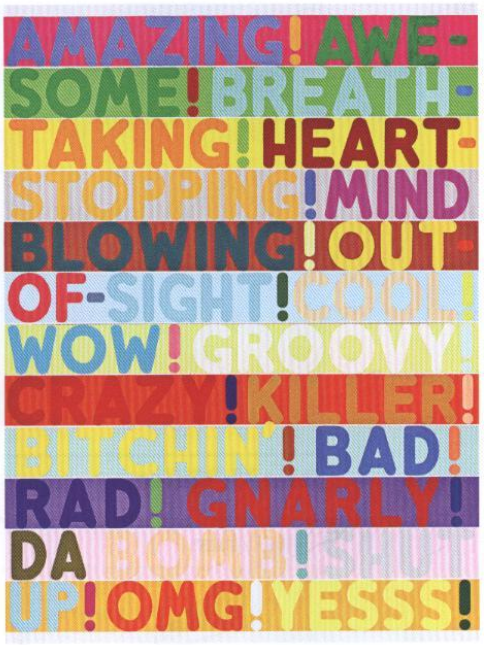
Mel Bochner
National Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

Sylvia Plath famously called herself 'Roget's strumpet', referring to her dependence on the famous thesaurus, which has remained in print since its first publication in 1852. Mel Bochner, whose practice has been defined by an investigation of the potential of synonymous language, might be described similarly.

Curated by James Meyer, 'In the Tower: Mel Bochner' includes two bodies of work, interrelated but separated by 40 years. The first room groups the artist's works on paper, ranging from those made in the 1960s to studies in the service of his more recent 'Thesaurus Paintings' (2003–11). The latter works, which fill the second gallery, are constituted entirely of words, or figures of speech, which describe a single idea or feeling (for example, 'futile, aimless, pointless, absurd' appear as a string of words in *Useless*, 2005). Bochner's subject is the English language, and both rooms excavate its potential meanings and limits.

The 'Thesaurus Paintings' are big and bright. They're the stars of the show, to which the works on paper are meant as a warm-up act. However, these smaller works – largely made on sketchbooks of lined or graph paper – are among the most subtle of the artist's career, and shouldn't be overlooked. Lining the walls of the first gallery are Bochner's early, oblique portraits of his Minimalist comrades from 1966, each made using a series of words the artist deemed analogous with his subject ('Repetition, repetition' begins his 1966 portrait of Robert Smithson). They are moving tributes, and as close to depictive as Bochner dares tread. This section also includes his more recent drawings and prints, in which Bochner visually explains his curation of words and colours; though they are all studies for the paintings to come, it isn't hard to prefer their controlled mania to the glossy finished product. It is a shame the paper works are relegated to a smaller space, and that they are segregated from their larger counterparts altogether. Integrating the work across medium and time period would perhaps have prompted more stirring visual connections.

What distinguishes Bochner from his peers is not only his dedication to language as medium, but his self-deprecating manner in doing so. This tendency is most evident in the 'Thesaurus Paintings', the largest of which are two-and-a-half metres tall. Each teeters on the brink of sarcasm, fishtailing between defeatism and exuberance. His choice of leading words – which double as titles – says it all: *Oh Well* (2010), *Babble* (2011) and *Useless*, to name a few. Bochner isn't all fatalism, and can keep his tongue in cheek: *Master of the Universe* (2010) and *Amazing!* (2011) are two of the largest paintings, which appear side by side. Every line has been assigned its own saturated colour, as has every letter of every word, and their combinations – sea green on pink, aquamarine on peach – are, by design, a little nauseating. The effect matches the content perfectly: disappointment cloaked in aggressive cheer.



Mel Bochner
Amazing!
2011
Oil and acrylic on two canvases
2.5×1.9 cm

The one non-'Thesaurus Painting' in the grouping is the smaller, less tightly executed *Blah*. Made in 2011, the piece depicts the same word over and over, dripping in white paint over a red background. If you didn't already get the message, this painting exists not only to illuminate Bochner's mounting frustration with the capacity of language to convey meaning, but also perhaps with conceptualism's own literary bloat. *Blah* is funny, but that is all it is; unlike the other paintings, which succeed due to their paradoxical combination of self-deprecating irony and precise execution, *Blah*'s means and ends are not adequately at war with one another.

Bochner is a literary painter, and by that I don't only mean he paints words; his sources, even if indirect, are authors. His early portraits recall Stéphane Mallarmé's 'shape poems', his strategy of using the first word as the title echoes the literary convention of referring to an untitled poem by its first line (as is the case with Shakespeare's sonnets and Emily Dickinson's poetry), and his general sense of gallows humour evokes Samuel Beckett. Also, Bochner is unmistakably Jewish. He was raised in an observant home in Pittsburgh, and later worked as a guard in the Jewish Museum in New York. It's hard not to notice how his cultural upbringing affected his intellectual curiosities, and his frustrated relationship with language. Standing in front of one of his 'Thesaurus Paintings', this Jew remembered her own family gathered around the table, each member speaking over another and yet saying the same thing, forever answering questions with more questions.

Carmen Winant

Mika Tajima
'The Architect's Garden'
2011
Installation view