13 Artists Who Highlight the Power of Words

● Alina Cohen   Jan 5, 2019 4:00 pm   f y ✉

Most of us are so used to reading that we forget each letter is a shape and each word its own composition. There's a significant aesthetic dimension to the writing we read daily—in emails and books, on packaging and signs—and so it makes sense that visual artists have co-opted graphic design and typography strategies for their own philosophical ends.

Using language, artists transform a basic communication tool—the alphabet—into unique provocations. Language is also particularly malleable, cost-free, and renewable. "There's a million different ways artists can use it," said Jewish Museum curator Kelly Taxter. "Often, it's artists who work with issues of politics or social justice." Just as artists are still finding new ways to manipulate paint, canvas, and space, they're constantly developing fruitful new reasons to turn words into art.

EJ Hauser ⊕ Follow
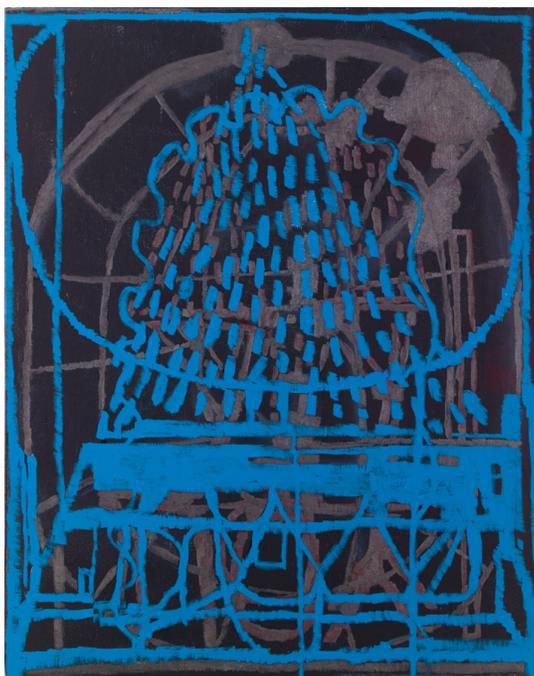
From 2008 to 2012, EJ Hauser used newsprint as a backdrop for her drawings. Up-to-the-minute writings about the world became literal foundations for the artist's gestural marks. Hauser explicitly linked abstraction with earthly concerns, arguing against claims that non-figurative work is divorced from reality. In halted attempt at terrorism, white swishes of oil paint overlay text about a civilian-thwarted attack. In laker, a shower of vaguely patriotic red, white, and blue brushstrokes obscure the faces of two basketball players. The sports section, ostensibly, is just as good a background as the international pages.

For a 2013 painting, *forget-me-not three*, Hauser painted her own text to undergird ambiguous black shapes. Beneath lines, circles, and a pair of cartoonish legs, the viewer can just make out the titular phrase, "forget me not." Written in off-white against a pale background, the words already look endangered, as though their disappearance and erasure is imminent.

In a body of work now on view at Derek Eller in New York, Hauser uses text as scaffolding for her images: Look closely at her marks and you'll find the backbones and curves of various letters, jumbled together to eliminate the boundary between word and picture.