

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

## THE PAINTED WORD

### MICHAEL BEVILACQUA AT GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

In his book on the post-punk movement, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, the critic Simon Reynolds describes the music of the British band Joy Division as having an “eerie spatiality.” This phrase also befits the two paintings in “An Ideal for Living,” Michael Bevilacqua’s third solo show at Gering & López Gallery. The show’s title, which comes from Joy Division’s 1978 debut EP, also belongs to its centerpiece, an 8-by-30 foot painting of acrylic, spray paint, and molotow pen on linen. The neutral tones of the background cause it to resemble a concrete wall subjected to haphazard attempts at revitalization in a futile attempt to combat the vandalism of posters, graffiti, and decay. Paradoxically, this practice of layering of flat on flat creates a sense of intermediate, physical depth that, at least in Bevilacqua’s oeuvre, is something both new and strange. Typical for the artist, *An Ideal* explicitly recalls pop culture through text, spray paint, and street art-like designs. In paintings like *Busy, Busy, Sunny Day*, 2003, recognizable images intermingled with and interrupted by colored forms create a vision of what the world of “Yellow Submarine” might have looked like a decade or so later. The painting’s style falls squarely in the genre of “Post-Pop,” owing its graphic stylization and mass cultural references to such Pop monoliths as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist. In particular, the latter’s horizontal, billboard-like paintings clearly influenced Bevilacqua’s preference for a similar layout and scale, and his method of juxtaposing and overlapping imagery gave the younger artist a model by which to combine material from unlike and unexpected sources.



Michael Bevilacqua, *Busy, Busy, Sunny Day*, 2003, Acrylic on linen, 72 x 136 inches, Collection Louisiana Museum, Denmark

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This inspiration seems to have taken a deeper hold in *An Ideal*. The painting's paneled structure especially recalls Rosenquist's epic *F-111*, 1964-65, recently on view at MoMA in a historical recreation of its debut showing at Leo Castelli. There, the 86-foot painting wrapped around the gallery's walls and engulfed its viewer in its vision of the military-industrial complex. Yet, at the same time, *An Ideal* also shows a move away from Pop's desire to collapse everything into surface. It's this move that introduces this new, eerie feeling into Bevilacqua's work, which has previously been much more straight-forward and immediate. As described earlier, the 2012 painting is less like a billboard and more like a wall. This new kind of layered surface recalls Robert Rauschenberg, who, with his kind of "Pre-Pop" neo-Dada, took the historical mode of collage to a new level by combining found imagery with painting on a large scale. Appropriately, Rauschenberg called these works "Combine paintings." As precursors to the later "Combines," which brought sculpture into the mix, these early works retained a flat, frontal surface that, like Bevilacqua's painting, often had the appearance of public walls.



James Rosenquist, *F-111* (detail), 1964-65. Oil on canvas with aluminum, twenty-three sections, 10' x 86'.

Quintessential to Rauschenberg's early experiments with the Combine paintings is *Rebus*, 1955, periodically on display at MoMA. One of Rauschenberg's masterpieces, this must-see painting predicts the tension between surface and depth that pervades Bevilacqua's new canvas. A horizontal cluster of images and materials forms a band across the canvas that suggests a timeline, structured by a somewhat spectral line of paint chips. The viewer is unsure if she should read the painting horizontally, like the sentence that the title implies, or as a less direct but more thematic archive of materials. A similar phenomenon structures *An Ideal*. On the one hand, the film strip-like panels, moments of texts, and the large stretch of white running almost across the entire painting produce a desire to find and follow a linear, left-to-right narrative—not necessarily a legible sentence, but a story or evolution. On the other hand, the various texts and images seem isolated in time and author, like posters and graffiti that have accrued on a surface over time, and consequently suggest a more fragmented, archaeological sense of time. The tension between these two readings of linear narrative and archaeological accretion is what makes the "spatiality" in Bevilacqua's painting at least potentially "eerie": unsettling yet intriguing, and suggestive that something might happen next.

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Robert Rauschenberg, *Rebus*, 1955. Mixed media on canvas mounted and stapled to fabric, three panels, 8' x 10' 11 1/8". Image courtesy MoMA.

This prospect of development suggests that Bevilacqua might be attempting to reexamine the term “post-Pop” and his place within it. After all, the genre can be easy to disparage. Like the Neo-Expressionism that accompanied its first incarnations in the 1980s, post-Pop often seemed to have nothing new to offer beyond a simple cultural update: tired strategies with new subjects. But if we consider Rauschenberg’s work as a kind of “pre-Pop,” Bevilacqua’s status as a post-Pop artist transforms from a consecutive distinction into a wider-spanning historical one, wherein the style not only follows Pop, but also intimates something beyond it. In this way, it becomes more similar to the label “post-punk,” of which Joy Division is exemplary. Although the genre had its roots in punk, it is touted for being more complex and introspective, for examining the genre, breaking it down, and expanding it by bringing new influences to bear on its framework. Thus, it is valued less for its debt to punk and more for the new types of music it spawned, such as alternative rock. The question, then, is how such a reexamination of post-Pop plays out in Bevilacqua’s new work. If *An Ideal* suggests that something might happen next, that something would appear to be *Trinity*, 2012, the other painting in the show. The overall style of the painting—black acrylic on silver spray paint—continues the experiments the artist exhibited at Kravets Wehby this past April, which also riffed on the Joy Division theme. But while these paintings of Olde English text and repeating, web-like patterns looked like bad Christopher Wool knock-offs, *Trinity*, thankfully distills its imagery into references that are at least slightly more opaque. Certainly, the upside-down cross is questionable: if we’re thinking about post-punk, then the spiritual imagery of U2’s early albums might come to mind. Yet the

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painting as a whole is intriguing in the way it combines ambiguous layering with an ordered composition to produce a tension often lacking in work by similar artists. Like the overlapping of forms in *An Ideal*, a patch of brown in the lower right of the canvas turns the silver surface from a background to a foreground. Derivate graffiti-like marks are replaced with a single, thin, horizontal line that is both abstract and representational, and a cross that seems to hang from it like an object instead of a shape. Ghostly imprints of the form that appear and disappear in the light further the effect, and *Trinity*, too, achieves that “eerie spatiality.”



Michael Bevilacqua, *An Ideal For Living*, 2012, Acrylic, spray paint & molotow on linen, 96 x 360 inches

Bevilacqua's work has always had a rebellious air to it, whether in its punk rock imagery or graffiti styling. In the recent show at Kravets Wehby, this rebelliousness seemed put-on, and that feeling isn't entirely gone. But the paintings in “An Ideal for Living,” by way of their toned-down palettes and controlled compositions, have a new anti-aesthetic edge. They present a welcome alternative to what curator Cecilia Alemani recently described as the current trend of “mid-scale abstract paintings with a pastel color palette: that sort of cool, off-hand abstraction that in the end is perfect for OTC (Over the Couch).” By lashing out against the surface of the painting and refusing its authority over the picture, Bevilacqua has begun to embrace and enact the punk rock ethos, instead of simply parroting its images. In doing so, he reveals his potential to turn post-Pop into a productive rather than repetitive enterprise, to move toward a new kind of “alternative painting,” and to give abstract painting some of the complexity and introspection it currently needs.



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Michael Bevilacqua, *Trinity*, 2012, Acrylic spray paint on canvas,  
84 x 84 inches