

ARTFORUM

MEL BOCHNER

Edward Vazquez – 13 February 2012

The latest “In the Tower” exhibition, part of an ongoing series highlighting individual artists of the postwar period, teems with words. This is not altogether surprising: Language has been central to Mel Bochner’s art since the mid-1960s, and here a selection of his early works pairs with his more recent thesaurus paintings of 2003–11. The show, curated by James Meyer, examines Bochner’s interest in linguistic systems, focusing on his use of the thesaurus as a generative compositional tool. “The thesaurus,” according to Bochner, “presents each word as an endlessly branching tree of family resemblances, planted in a neighborhood where meanings overlap.” Indeed, such overlaps—and related fissures—are on full view in distinct moments in Bochner’s work.

A smaller gallery collects early text-based drawings from 1966–68, including restrained portraits of Dan Flavin, Robert Smithson, and Donald Judd, in addition to numerous works on paper related to the larger thesaurus canvases. Bochner’s *Portrait of Eva Hesse*, 1966, composed of expanding rings of synonyms for the word *wrap*, figures on both walls, as he remade the work in charcoal in 2001, sparking a return to the strategy of synonymy. Even in black and white, Bochner’s recent work appears looser, his 2008 and 2009 lists peppered with bubbles and arrows containing additional terms and phrases nestled into his word studies.

The canvases in the main gallery methodically parse individual words and phrases, with language often sliding into colloquial speech by the lower portion of the compositions. Bochner’s use of color, however, complicates straightforward reading. With increasing chromatic variety, to the point of distinct hues chosen for each individual hand-painted letter in his 2010 and 2011 pieces, text itself becomes an all-over composition. This coloristic variation and semantic doubling pry language apart twice over, and Bochner’s words pulse with everyday meanings tumbling beyond them.