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ART & DESIGN | What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

MEL BOCHNER

By ROBERTA SMITH 16 June 2017

In “Voices” at Peter Freeman Inc., Mel Bochner’s new paintings are noisier than ever. The fusion of slang, color, emotion and process that this erstwhile Conceptualist has pursued on canvas for the past two decades has become more intensely enmeshed and crazed. Previous paintings confronted us with solid walls of fat letters spelling out synonymic insults and dismissals, often profane; they were colorful in both language and hue. Now the words have broken rank, slipping and sliding through the brushwork and slurred colors, in and out of sight, still hurling insults that increasingly implicate art.



Amazing!, 2015

With its title stuttering and dissolving amid heavy strokes of blue and black, “Gobbledygook” (2015) covers a lot of ground: painting, talking, thinking. In white on red, “Drool” (2016) messily enumerates synonyms for nonsense, while its title summons the liquidity of both paint and aged mouths. The white-on-black “Amazing!” (2015) has some of the orderliness of previous work, except that its stack of superlatives (“Cool!” “OMG!”) is contradicted at the bottom with “Shut Up!” There’s a more haywire, if identically titled version in white on red.

As if by way of explanation, one canvas repeats the words of a well-known Conceptual work by the artist, “Language Is Not Transparent”; another elaborates thoughtfully on a quote from Cézanne.

I miss the unequivocal frontality of the earlier paintings, with their blustering walls of words. There are adolescent moments here (dollar signs and exclamation points) and paint handling that resembles Abstract Expressionist do-overs. But Mr. Bochner seems intent on freeing his brush the same way he previously freed his tongue, and id. He is approaching his late 70s, forging ahead.