

Mel Bochner

29th May – 11 september 2010

The Galerie Nelson-Freeman is proud to present its second solo exhibition of the American artist Mel Bochner.

Since the 60s, Bochner has been a pioneer of Conceptual Art and was one of the first artists to use written language within his work.

Since then, Bochner has continued his exploration into the nature of art and the mechanisms of pictorial representation using a number of different media: photography, installation, film and painting. His work is enriched by philosophical thought, grammar and mathematical principals and features the use of both letters and numbers to illustrate the relationship between signifier and meaning. His art emphasises the disparity between words and our perception of their meaning, between the content and the container or between an idea and the reality of an object.

For this new exhibition, Mel Bochner has continued his work on his « Thesaurus Paintings », presented for the first time at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The series takes its name from *Roget's Thesaurus*, a linguistic reference work, which has been Bochner's constant companion since his first oeuvre concerning language in 1966. The works consist of lists of synonyms and words of similar meaning organised in parallel lines of text. Each section begins with a generic word and the list develops in crescendo through a number of synonyms to finish with the most familiar or even vulgar term, creating something of a surprise effect. Bochner considers that "the function of color is to divert the responsibility of a text concerning its meaning"ⁱ and thus in this series colour is of prime importance. The background colour is chosen in advance but the colours of the different words are more spontaneous and improvised and are associated with each individual word.

In the earlier « Thesaurus Paintings », bright colours were used to reinforce the graphic impact of the words. The eight new paintings all dating from 2010, which form the exhibition, follow on from work begun on the dilution of outlines in 2006. These works consist of oil paint on black velvet applied using a hydraulic press, lending the paintings true materiality. During the process of application, runs have appeared, which blur the rounded outlines and alter the graphic quality of the letters on their sombre background. Taking on a true physical presence, the letters no longer simply fulfil a graphic function, they also become pictorial elements and their meaning and message become blurred.

Alongside his « Thesaurus Paintings », Bochner presents to exhibit a series of paintings entitled "Blah, Blah, Blah" which were conceived using the same procedure. In this yet more radical series, words are reduced to onomatopoeia, the graphic transcription of a sound. Any meaning soon disappears in the constant repetition of these four letters describing a flood of words having no true importance.

With these series, shown in Europe for the first time, Mel Bochner depicts once again the impotence of words. "In the end, the interesting thing is the incongruity in all linguistic systems, not in what they say but rather in what they are incapable of saying."ⁱⁱ

Mel Bochner was born in 1940 in Pittsburgh. He lives and works in New York. His work is in numerous public collections including the Tate Modern (London), MoMA (New York), the Whitney Museum (New York), the Pompidou Centre and the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris). Recent solo museum exhibitions have included the Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh) and the MAMCO (Geneva) in 2003; and the Art Institute of Chicago and the Domaine de Kerguéhennec in 2007. In 2011-2012, a major retrospective exhibition will be organised by the Whitechapel Gallery (London), the Museu Serralves (Porto) and the Haus der Kunst (Munich).

ⁱ "Mel Bochner, Frédéric Paul, Une Conversation: 3 décembre 2007 – 13 février 2008." in *Mel Bochner*, Domaine de Kerguéhennec, 2007

ⁱⁱ Interview between Mel Bochner and Claire Legrand in *Mel Bochner, Measurements: works from the 1960s/1990s*. Dijon, Bignan, Fonds régional d'art contemporain de Bourgogne, 2002.