

ArtSeen

Sam Jablon: *Linger Longer*

By [Saul Ostrow](#)



Installation view: *Sam Jablon: Linger Longer* at Morgan Presents, 2024. Courtesy Morgan Presents.

In my catalog essay for Sam Jablon's first solo exhibition *Word:Play* in 2014, I observed that his works operate neither as metaphors nor symbols, but events that afford the opportunity to access conflicting systems of references and associations within the realm of abstract painting. This still holds true and his strategy remains much the same, though his paintings are now more sophisticated. Over the past decade, his approach has also become less experimental; increasingly he indexically samples Ab Ex, hard-edge abstraction, Color Field, etc., as a way to explore the semiotic nature of abstract painting itself. In *Linger Longer*, he focuses significantly on those practices in which process and the artist's hand play a prominent role.

Each painting in this exhibition consists of an evocative word and phrase (which also serve as its title) that has either been foregrounded as if it were an object or elements in a still-life, or whose letters have been used as compositional elements. Underlying these textual treatments are gestural, or painterly grounds that are complete paintings in themselves. The interplay between the text and the painted ground results in the words being legible in some cases and illegible in others. Letters in Jablon's paintings are often layered, jumbled, or obscured suggesting that words are not fixed or stable entities. By treating his texts as physical objects made up of parts, he draws attention to the materiality of language while creating a visual tension. Consequently, Jablon's paintings at first glance, appear to playfully pose a challenge to the viewer to "read" his work.

Jablon's works are an exploration of the influence that language, and associations have on our perception—we see what we want to, or have been trained to. By calling our attention to the materiality of painting and the abstractness of language, he creates an encounter that challenges the idea that language can become a constraining structure that captures and confines our experiences and understanding of reality.

The materiality of the paint, the shifts in scale, and the breaks in the lettering that at times make his words illegible all contribute to a sense that Jablon's paintings are "machines" consisting of a multiplicity of systems of signification and modes of expression and representation. This challenges the viewer to reconsider the seductive role that evocative words and phrases like "Desire," "Don't Panic," and "Endless Passion" play in shaping their expectations and associations. At first Jablon's paintings appear to be driven by a desire to give expression to emotional states, but soon give way to referencing those embodied acts of speech, perception, cognition, and aesthetics. These liminal acts can only be inferred, as they have no existence outside the body and mind. By emphasizing both the material processes of painting and the fracturing of the structure of written language, Jablon confronts the viewer with the complex nature of painting and written language as multifaceted means of conveying differing forms of information and meaning. Consequently, Jablon's works suggest that cognition is not a purely neutral or conceptual process, but one grounded in sensory experiences and association. In resisting any fixed meaning or relationship between text and image, Jablon's paintings stand in opposition to our world of increasingly mediated experiences and images.



Moving beyond this phenomenological account, Jablon's paintings can also be seen as part of a lineage of visual poetry—an experimental approach to language, drawing from various historical and contemporary influences; his work builds upon a tradition of artists who have pushed the boundaries of text and image, such as the Futurists, Dadaists, and Fluxus artists. Jablon's paintings are informed by a poetic sensibility, with the text often derived from his own written work. This poetic approach to language allows him to create a sense of ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning, further disrupting the viewer's expectations and inviting a more subjective, interpretive engagement with the work. It is not by using texts in his work, but the fact that his texts are used as a structural element that guide his compositions that Jablon's paintings come to exist at the interface of abstract painting and visual poetry where the objective is to evoke their subject matter rather than simply describe it.



Sam Jablon, *Desire*, 2024. Oil on linen, 90 x 80 inches. Courtesy the artist and Morgan Presents.

By not permitting signification where it cannot be derived from experience, Jablon sets aesthetic value against knowledge, emphasizing the intricate relationship between language, aesthetics, materiality, and visual effects within each piece. Inevitably this brings us to Ludwig Wittgenstein's emphasis on the limits of language and the ineffability of certain experiences. Wittgenstein argued that there are aspects of reality that cannot be fully captured through language—they can only be "pointed at." This idea of a space between what can be said and what can only be pointed to resonates with Jablon's approach. By treating text as abstract, emotive imagery rather than just linguistic signifiers, he creates a space where aesthetic meaning transcends the constraints of language. By blurring the boundaries between text, image, and emotion, Jablon evokes sensations and experiences that go beyond the literal meaning of the words he uses. In this way, he invites his viewer to experience their meaning on a more visceral, sensory level.

Contributor

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