

ARTSEEN | APRIL 2026

Sam Jablon: *Luck or Else*

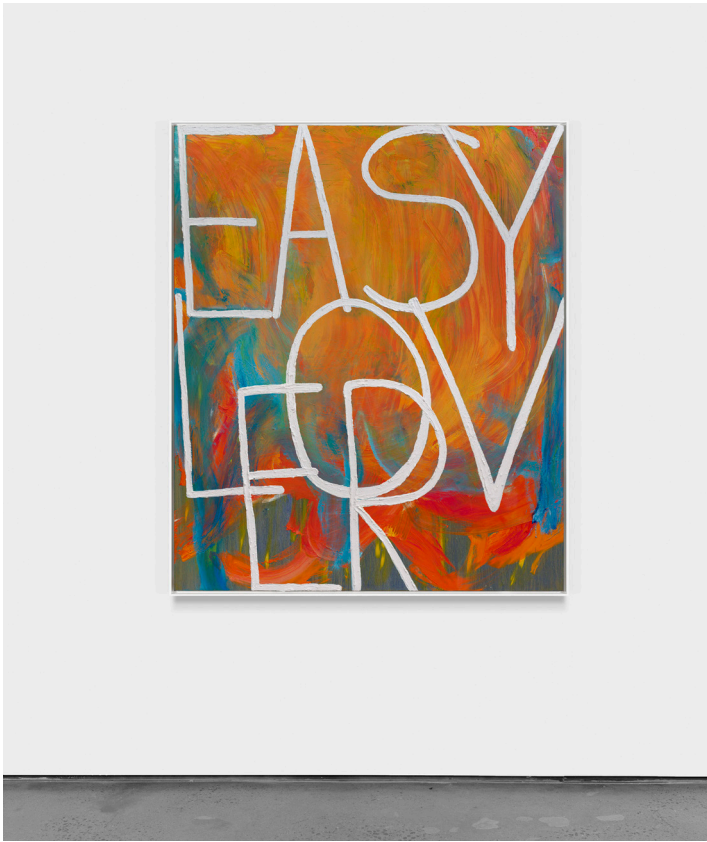
By Noa Wynn



Installation view: *Sam Jablon: Luck or Else* at Morgan Presents, New York, 2026. Courtesy Morgan Presents.

Sam Jablon's exhibition at Morgan Presents, *Luck or Else*, is an intimate inquiry into his hybrid practice as both poet and painter. While often categorized as a "text-based" artist, Jablon resists such taxonomies; his work refuses fixed classification. The poems come first, and the paint follows. Where text leads, paint responds, and color opens into a newly brilliant register.

At the core of the exhibition is "Luck or Else," the source poem by Jablon from which the show earns its name. The exhibition begins with this poem, but it evolves. As Jablon renders its phrases through painting, his original lines shift, becoming a non-linear poem, reconstituted across canvases that the viewer moves through in space.



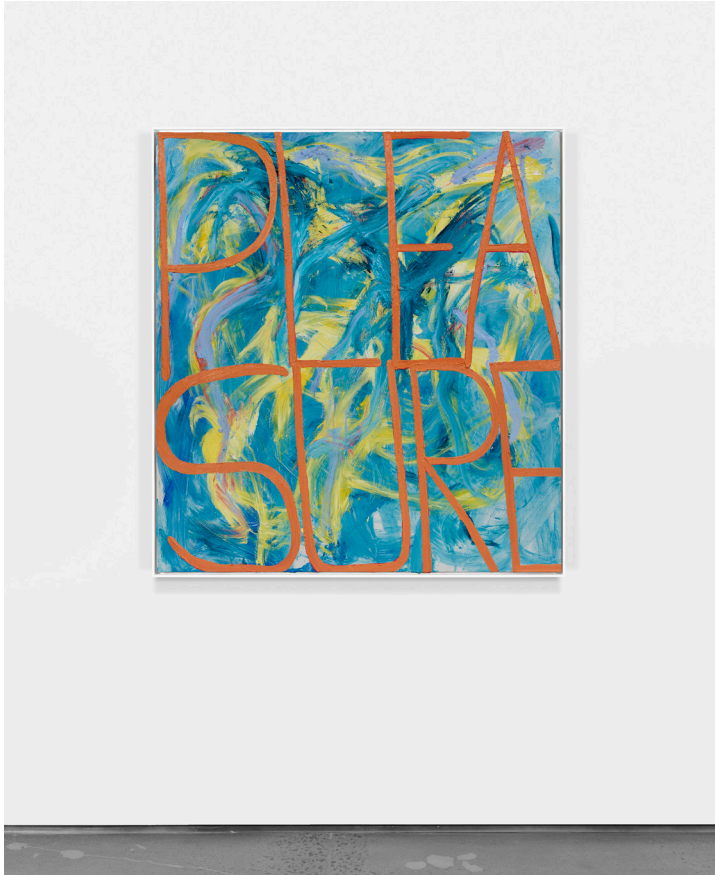
Sam Jablon, *Easy Lover*, 2026. Oil on linen, 60 x 50 inches. Courtesy Morgan Presents.

Entering the exhibition, one is greeted by *Easy Lover* (2026), a large-scale painting that situates the viewer within Jablon's autobiographical and linguistic terrain. Sun-drenched orange tones pulse against cooler blues, creating a field of tension, while the phrase "EASY LOVER" hovers across the background in white paint. The artwork feels both intimate and elusive—an innuendo, a memory, a glimpse of something just out of reach. It also signals a turn in Jablon's practice: a move away from the dense, heavily impasto-ed surfaces of earlier works toward a confident handling of both text and paint.

Nearby, *Oy Vey* (2026) carries cultural and familial inflections, invoking the artist's identity. Its pale palette of pinks and blues, and Jablon's gestural markings imbue the work with tenderness. The Yiddish phrase itself, so embedded in everyday speech across New York City, becomes more than an expression; it operates as a collective linguistic code. One might think of works such as Deborah Kass's *OY/YO*, the sculptural monument outside the Brooklyn Museum, which similarly plays with dual meanings and vernacular speech. Distinct in purpose and scale, Kass operates in the public sphere whereas Jablon turns inward, absorbing language into the painted surface through a hybrid approach that situates him within a lineage treating language as both cultural marker and material.

Jablon's canvases are built through cycles of mark-making and erasure—strokes wiped back, repainted, and reworked over time. Meaning accumulates not only through what is added, but through what is removed. Letters become structural by dividing the surface, forming rhythm, tension, and space for color to expand. His backdrops assert themselves as paintings in their own right, lush, painterly fields that operate independently of their inscription. In this sense, *Luck or Else* is a meditation on the frictions of art and poetry.

The painting *Luck* (2026), the largest in the show, anchors the exhibition both visually and conceptually. Vibrant yellows, teals, violets, and magentas bleed into one another beneath the forceful inscription of the word “LUCK.” The bloodshot red letters assert themselves against the luminous, almost airy ground, creating a charged contrast that feels both insistent and unsettled—perhaps a nod to the unpredictable, often unforgiving landscape of the art world, and life more broadly.



Sam Jablon, *Pleasure*, 2026. Oil on linen, 48 x 44 inches. Courtesy Morgan Presents.

Adjacent works such as *Pleasure*, *Blessed*, and *Or Else* (all 2026) extend this interplay between words and paint. Each one feels like a fragment of the larger poem, yet realized in its own right. *Pleasure* adopts a predominantly blue and soft yellow palette, punctuated by the orange lettering. Airy, fluid strokes mark a departure from the density of earlier works. *Or Else*, by contrast, retains traces of Jablon’s past: thicker applications of paint, with bright orange and red text that appears almost to drip from the surface. The letters take on a sculptural quality, hovering like low-relief forms, charged with suspense.

This strain between legibility and illegibility is further explored in pieces like *Mischief* (2026), where letters overlap, intercept, and obscure one another. Set against a swirling field of blues, teals, lilacs, and yellows, the orange letters fold into and interrupt themselves, collapsing language into gesture and complicating the act of reading. The viewer is drawn into a slower mode of looking, navigating the work as painting, poetry, and language. Words resist immediate clarity and must be read and re-read, not only to decipher their form, but to construct meaning over time.



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A wall of smaller works extends this sense of accumulation. Phrases appear in quick succession, reinforcing the exhibition's logic as a fragmented, unfolding poem rather than a fixed sequence. What emerges across the exhibition is not simply a flirtation between genres, but a destabilization of both. Language is no longer fixed to meaning, nor is painting confined to form; instead, each medium facilitates a space where interpretation remains in flux.

The exhibition reads as both assertion and vulnerability. In an ever-shifting world, Jablon insists on presence: on making, on writing, on continuing. His practice suggests that luck is not passive, but something wrestled with, insisted upon. Painting and poetry collapse into one another in Jablon's work, reminding us that language, like life—shifting, reassembled, and somehow, still meaningful—is always in motion.

Noa Wynn is a New York-based freelance journalist with an academic background in art history who writes about arts and culture, focusing on global visual culture, photography, and new media.