

Art in America

NOVEMBER 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Samuel Jablon:
Nowhere Bus, 2014,
acrylic, fused glass
and glass tile on
wood, 48 by 60
inches; at Freight +
Volume.

SAMUEL JABLON

Freight + Volume

Samuel Jablon's wonderful paintings are covered in multicolored words rendered in acrylic and studded with glass tiles. This show, the Brooklyn-based artist's first solo exhibition, read as the statement of a worldview—one that is at the same time joyful and anxious. The painting *All In* (all works 2013 or 2014) contains the words "EVERYTHING" and "NOTHING," but Jablon seems to come down squarely on the side of everything. The colored glass tiles are alluring in a kitschy way, and reflect light like costume jewelry or a sequined dress. The words in the paintings can sometimes be difficult to read, the visual equivalent of song lyrics you can't quite make out. The lines break in unexpected places, and the letters may be flipped upside down or backward.

The exhibition consisted of 13 medium-size works (the largest 76 by 46 inches) and 18 small works (most 12 by 9 inches). All are on wood panels, but, since the artist paints their 3-inch-deep sides, they have the look of stretched canvases. Words are built up on backgrounds that could function as abstract paintings in their own right, with areas of flat color and often a trusswork of connecting beams. Hot and cool colors harmonize loudly; *Nowhere Bus*, for instance, is a symphonic composition with deep red, turquoise, lilac and touches of gold.

The texts in Jablon's paintings are born of a dedication to poetry (the artist is also a poet, and organizes readings/performances). But several of them—for example, "CO- / ME / LET'S G / ET / NOWHERE," "HERE / HER / EHEREH / ERE" and "DO / It"—are not so much poems as everyday

words and phrases, so common they might go unremarked were they not given a colorful, sparkly treatment. The texts in at least two works play on quotes from famous authors: *Beckett* features a variation on Samuel Beckett, "MUST / gO ONC / ANT GO O / N MUST / CANT go / MUST / I'LL GO ON"; and the diptych *Simple Country Girl* reads like a punk riff on Edna St. Vincent Millay, with "I bURNED / my CANDLE / AT boTh ENDS I / SHALL NOT / LAST THE NIGHT buT / WHAT A FUCK- / ING LIFE."

Jablon's paintings offer the perspective of a New Yorker who has soaked up the city through his pores. The glass tiling recalls the mosaics that spell out the station names on subway platforms; the stylistic specifics of the letters vary among the paintings as they do from station to station. Jablon's letters, in their manic handmade-ness, also suggest graffiti, but this is a graffiti that glorifies the word rather than the writer. Other associations that come to mind are the pixels of a Times Square advertising screen and elaborate cake decorations.

Text paintings are, of course, nothing new. But while Jablon's paintings have something in common with Basquiat's and Ruscha's works, as well as with Christopher Wool's stenciled phrases and with Deborah Kass's recent, exuberantly colored canvases, they evince an approach and attitude that marks the arrival of a new voice.

—Jeff Frederick