

Visual Language

Visual Language is a two-part exhibition showing concurrently at FACTION Art Projects, Harlem, New York City and Subliminal Projects in East Los Angeles. Curated in collaboration, this bi-coastal group survey show centres on various approaches to words and images in contemporary art. It draws, with urgency, on the political, social and cultural landscapes of America now.

The conjoining of word and image through the history of art and design is well established. Visual and verbal languages have shared a stage for centuries: from Egyptian hieroglyphs to seventeenth-century Chinese wall hangings that combine poetry and painting; from fifteenth-century Italian woodcuts to fourteenth-century illuminated manuscripts; from twentieth-century advertising to the twenty-first century collision of words and images online. The function of all this visual and verbal interweaving is distinct in each case. Sometimes it serves a practical purpose: to educate, remind or illustrate. At other times that purpose is more directed, aimed at rousing, coaxing or, even, in the case of twentieth-century propaganda, controlling.

Modern and Contemporary art have continued to mine the space between words and images too: Pop art of the 1960s which riffed on the language of commercial advertising is perhaps the most obvious example, but Cubism, Futurism, Concrete Poetry, Surrealism, Dada, Photomontage, Collage and Graffiti have all, in their different ways, picked away at the relationships between visual and verbal languages.

In Visual Language the interaction between words and images is likewise varied. Sometimes the works in the exhibition use words and images that work together to reinforce a point of view, at other times words and images appear to rub against each other, leading us to question either the images or the words put to us. Because of the array of works on show the tone of the exhibition is also diverse, spanning the declamatory, the antagonistic, the restrained, and the documentary.

Visual Language brings together artworks that are combative and provocative in the case of Jenny Holtzer and Guerrilla Girls. Originally fly posted across New York City, Holtzer's *Inflammatory Letters* (1979–1982) warn us to "*Destroy Superabundance*" and that "*Fear Feeds On Fear*" – words still feel relevant today. Similarly forthright, Guerrilla Girls expose persistent misogynist injustices and immoral hypocrisies of the art market.

Betty Tompkins's, approach to shedding light on persistent gender bias is no less critical. The works in this exhibition comprise a selection of images drawn from a project she developed at FLAG Art Foundation in 2016 which totalled 1000 small paintings. The

project examines everyday instances of sexism by collating examples of descriptions of women that were submitted to Tompkins from men and women internationally. These descriptions range from the derogatory *Not Now, Dear*, to the violent *Put a Bag Over Your Head*, and the predatory *Aching to Touch Her*.

Other works in Visual Language take aim at institutionalised cultural racism. In his restrained painted collages, Ramsay Dau pays particular attention to the presence and presentation of African anthropological objects in Western museum collections. Umar Rashid, on the other hand, homes in on the rampant racism that underlies historical acts of colonization. The seriousness at the root of his fictionalised re-tellings of historical events, however, clashes with his brightly coloured, even child-like, illustrative paintings. Ed Ruscha's etching, bearing the words *ZOOT SUIT* in boxy letters – also tackles racial discrimination. The Zoot Suit – fashionable among African-American and Mexican-Americans in the 1940 – has become emblematic of racism and hostility towards immigrants after violent outbursts led by U.S. military personnel targeted men wearing Zoot Suits in Los Angeles, 1943. These outbreaks became known as the Zoot Suit Riots.

The current political landscape is the subject of artworks by Nathan Russel and Shepard Fairey who use satire to register their frustration with and criticism of systems of government in the United States. Fairey employs bold colour and the aesthetic sensibilities of design and advertising to do this, while Russel makes use of a simplified, often black and white, naive comic-strip style illustration.

An injection of irreverence comes from the works of D*Face and Wayne White who exploit humour as a means to record human experience. For White this combines historical painting with contemporary slogans. In one example, a print by Paul Detlefsen (1899–1986) depicts an idealised farmyard setting complete with smiling rosy-cheeked children playing with a puppy and a family of geese by a pond. Over the idyl White emblazons the words *TUFF SHIT* in three dimensional lettering. It is a jolting reminder of the uncomfortable, and unequal, truth behind the American Dream. A similar subversion of the associations of words and symbols takes place in D*Face's work. His sculpture, *Peace is a Dirty Word* (2015) is a bronze cast handgun. Its barrel is comically elongated and contorted to spell the word 'Peace' in incongruously upbeat, loopy writing. The contrast of the gun, symbolising violence, and the word 'peace' are surely a comment on the contentious issue of gun control in the US right now.

Other artists in the exhibition interrogate the relationship between words and images more obliquely. Chad Kouri and Scott Albrecht's works, for example, use colour, shape and form to gesture toward language but their meaning remains ambiguous. Scott

Albrecht's work is influenced by a clean design aesthetic. His typographic sensibilities are transformed into brightly coloured painted forms whose compressed contours echo the shape of letters, but hold back from direct communication. Kouri's works form part of his Jazz Movement Studies. Here bright colours and simplified non-verbal symbols like zig-zags, coils and spirals are used to translate the experience of listening to improvised Free Jazz, a thriving musical scene in Kouri's hometown of Chicago.

It is commonplace to describe life in the twenty-first century as being saturated by words and images. Visual Language looks at a spectrum of artistic strategies that centre on the relationship between words and images in contemporary culture and society. The artists in Visual Language share a deep understanding of the double-edged power of words, in combination with images, to inform, connect and enlighten but also to provoke, coerce and mislead.

Lizzie Lloyd