

Kay Rosen



Inez a Inez

Kay Rosen, *Inez Has One Nose*, 1991, Silver and black sign paint on canvas, 7½" x 39". Courtesy Feature

In Kay Rosen's paintings, words play while standing in place, making her scrupulously legible imagery move past its simple, concrete demonstrations of readability into tactfully performative positions that are as riveting as they are riveted. The visual stability of her canvases is not upset even when a momentarily fixed meaning of a depicted word or phrase disappears, suddenly to be replaced by a new, seemingly at times unrelated connotation: it can be seen as a hybrid word-picture counterpart to the psychologically loaded double-image (like the duck/rabbit optical game cited by Wittgenstein and painted by Johns) in which a form refuses to have only one interpretation, remaining inconstant within the rigidity of its structure and shape. Probably no other artist today is more clearly demonstrating the sophisticated visual capabilities of the formally standardized, yet stylistically flexible letter-forms that help most of us convey our ideas to others; moreover, Rosen repeatedly proves herself to be so adept at making puns in her pictures that one wonders how she manages to construct façades that more than handle the sheer *overloading* of multiple interpretations instigated by her messages, without killing the messenger. These paintings weather the threat of the signs they display, signs composed of words that have been put in the funny yet canny position (by either a writer or a reader) of saying one thing (or another) and meaning another (or an other another), and vice versa, without losing their visual impact, conceptual wit, or respect for

significance and its communal value.

Only the black-on-silver paintings (done in enamel sign paint on canvas) are present in this installation; even though nearly all of Rosen's work could easily be mistaken for actual signage at first glance, these paintings—particularly when isolated from her more colorful works—have an institutional look that seems to suggest either directional or informational purposes. On closer inspection, however, many of the "directives" or "facts" on their reflective (in both senses of the word) surfaces appear to be playing with us as well as with themselves, but it's not all fun and games. In *Queue Up* (all works 1991), for example, the two words step in line—queueup—as they tell us to do the same; while another painting, *Ten Men Met*, shows how conceptually wide and potent Rosen's territory truly is: it turns the same visual trick as *Queue Up*, but the end result is a poignantly misshapen version of the word tenement with composite n/m letters, a "word" not unrelated to the phrase of the title. Instantly these two canvases are connected to each other not only by what we see but, more important, by what we feel, when we witness letters and words that role-play both physically and verbally in order to address timely social situations, speaking with agility instead of power.

Other paintings are almost athletic: *Stunts*, for example, may be either the word flipped on its back and made vulnerable, or, just as likely, an image of verbal "strength" as the crossbars of the two "t"s seem to be bench-

pressing the weight of the term, proudly displaying its capabilities. *Tidbit* is, of course, a compound word with mirror images as its two parts, but in Rosen's subtle contextualization it may also only be what it says it is: a part of something larger that is not completely there, since the tops of the letters that are visible are cut off by the upper edge of the canvas. Spelled phonetically, *Divide* divides itself right through its center "v"—two "i"s that look identical in the word are subsequently isolated when represented by the symbols for their sounds. In all cases, the words that Rosen chooses retain their status in language despite their newly empowered visual responsibilities.

One of the usual criticisms of text-based art is that it suffers in the translation from one language to another; Rosen's paintings, however, often have a flexibility that approaches the cross-cultural. The puns in *Inez Has One Nose* (*Inez a Inez*), and *Same* (MÈMÈ) are not as silly as they initially seem, but instead more directly allude to the questions of difference and otherness that ultimately become the main issues in Rosen's work. Therefore it is of fundamental importance that Rosen is making her statements with paintings—objects that function in a practice that frequently has been resistant to language, not to mention to women. The visual, conceptual, and political completeness of Rosen's paintings help demonstrate just how irrelevant such phony elitism has become. (*Feature*, January 8-February 8)

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