



YVON LAMBERT

Paris 108, rue Vieille-du-Temple, Paris, F-75003 France, TEL +33 1 42 71 09 33

New York 550 West 21st Street, New York, NY 10011 TEL +1 212 242 3611

London 20 Hoxton Square, London, N1 6NT TEL +44 207 729 2687

Decter, Joshua, "Kay Rosen, Yvon Lambert," *Artforum*, Issue XLVII, No. 6, Feb. 2009, pg. 188-189

Kay Rosen

YVON LAMBERT

Is it possible to communicate with phrases, words, and letters in a postlinguistic way? Is the act of reading, per se, a visual, cognitive, linguistic, or other type of experience? Such are the questions elicited by Kay Rosen's exquisitely calibrated language-based works. She can be linked to that foundational generation of Conceptualists from the 1960s, including Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and Joseph Kosuth, who utilized linguistic systems (not merely *text*) as a ground of philosophical and perceptual inquiry and, arguably, the basis of a new aesthetic.

In "Scareful!," an exhibition made up of recent small canvases, a work on paper, and larger-scale wall paintings (and done in conjunction with Alexander Gray Associates, where an older installation was shown), Rosen wryly suggests that with language there is always more and less than meets the eye. The show gains centrifugal force around a 2008 wall painting that reads *REMOVAL*, in large sky-blue letters. Initially, it appears to be merely the word *removal*, though a second look reveals a displacement of this word into another linguistic configuration that swerves meaning elsewhere: the seemingly illogical conjunction of *REM* and *OVAL*. What does *taking something away* have to do with *REM* and *OVAL*? Nothing, unless one notices the title of the work, *Removal from Office*, and then, possibly, a referential meaning surfaces. In this act of removal, the poetics of language meets the politics of reference, connoting an exiting president. Another large wall work deploys meta-language almost like meta-sculpture, with two phrases facing each other on converging walls: On the left is *CANTILEVER*, and on the right, *I CANTILEVER* (the words of each arranged vertically). It's almost impossible to adequately describe this work, wherein the two phrases seem to engage in an absurd call-and-response loop of poetics sprung from the word *cantilever*, here cleverly deconstructed and estranged from itself, and us.

Among Rosen's small-scale paintings and works on paper, *Belted*, 2007–2008, made with enamel sign paint on canvas, features the word *SHIRT* placed above *SKIRT*, each rendered in a salmon tone on the piece's pale-pink background. A small black rectangular element functions as the "belt" for the *H* in *SHIRT*, so that the letter becomes what the word designates. The odd little pictorial shape appears again in *SKIRT*, just to the left of the *K*, which is revealed to be

Kay Rosen, *Belted*, 2007–2008, enamel sign paint on canvas, 18½ x 17".



a "tightened" version of the *H*, the shirt cinched to form a skirt. This suggests an interplay between abstraction and legibility, conflating beautifully, the formal terms of painting and the construction of words. This tactic of "bridging" letters to allude to other things in the world (beyond the putatively intrinsic meaning of the word itself returns in *Haw Haw Islands with Bridge*, 2008, also enamel sign paint on canvas, wherein a red rectilinear shape connects, visually and linguistically, *I* to *I* in the word *HAWAII* (suspended in off-white lettering over an ocean-blue background) to form a quasi *H* at the end. Complicating matters, the title reminds us to read the word from left to right, and from right to left, nearly simultaneously, so that we are contemplating *HAWAII* and *HAW HAW* (as well as *HA WAH*, among other possible visual/cognitive reorderings).

Slice of Life, 2007–2008, features *LI E* above *LI E* in gray colored pencil on white paper, suggesting the ghostlike presence of that infamous expression, sliced away into a lie of words, an apparent elision of meaning. Rosen's practice might be understood from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, which posits that we understand linguistic systems on conceptual terms, as part of human cognition: Meaning constructed within a mental space, and language is always contextually specific, not a universal condition. Rosen's surgically precise reengineering of words and phrases nudges us toward moments of linguistic (*un*)re-cognition, wherein normative signification is carefully derailed and reassembled, disclosing the malleability of words within the context of painting's visual codes.

—Joshua Decter