

In Review

Joe Amrhein at Roebbling Hall

by Sarah Schmerler

Before he founded Pierogi 2000, Joe Amrhein was a sign painter by trade, painstakingly limning letters by hand on walls and windows, then funneling the money he made into making his own artwork (abstract paintings on canvas and the like). Now it's some six years later; Pierogi is a clear success, sign painting is a dying art, and Amrhein's work has hit upon its stride – and a certain economy. Think of it as creative merger between his two day jobs – and the rather cynical sense of humor he seems to have gained along the way.

Most of the seven large pieces on display are composed of hand-painted texts on mylar or glass. The texts have all been culled by Amrhein from art reviews ripped from well-known periodicals ("ArtForum," "Flash Art," etc.), and each one is more ridiculously bombastic than the next. "A LATE-MODERN POST SPUTNIK HARDWARE-AND-DIME-STORE TOTEM" reads one long strip of mylar; "WHIMSY WITH A WHIF OF ALLEGORY" another. Amrhein renders them to perfection in hardware store nostalgia colors, then stacks them, venetian blind style, one on top of the other, so that the pieces build in concealment and obfuscation as they get longer (sound like your average review?).

There's something bombproof about this show: criticize Amrhein and you risk sounding like you side with a bunch of misguided pundits. But, mercifully, Amrhein doesn't overemphasize the joke. He simply relies on his considerable skill as a painter, and lets his own craft do the talking.

Indeed, he's got an impressive lexicon of fonts at his disposal. They range from backwards-leaning italics to chunky, and (ironically enough) old-time dime-store window ads, and they feel somehow animated, as if the words themselves were lifting weights and leaning over backwards to give these ridiculously self-conscious phrases some true meaning or substance.

While this artmaking strategy is one you can get used to pretty quickly, each piece manages to say something slightly different about the impact such hastily dashed phrases have on the people who read them. In "Insight," for instance, Amrhein paints phrase after phrase on large panes of glass, only to smash and splinter them into a huge heap in the corner. (Let's remember that these dashed off phrases can, quite literally, inflict pain on artists). The more delicate "Rationalized" also uses glass for a support, but here it's layered in shelf-like panels like an empty bookcase. Viewers read the words inscribed on them from a distance (OSCILLATING AMBIGUITY; NO REAL IDEOLOGICAL FOCUS; THE ABSTRACT QUALITIES OF SPACE) – not on the glass but in long shadows cast on the wall. (Words have a longer shelf life than we might at first imagine). Using transparent media like mylar and glass as a support lends these large phrases a certain delicacy – a nice counterpoint to the weightiness and bombast of the verbiage.

Usually its writing that's thought of as the more rational and carefully considered of the arts, and visual expression as mindless – more direct. But here the opposite proves true. If only critics spent as much time crafting their words as Amrhein does, the gap between my job and a former sign painter's would narrow considerably.

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