

## *Effective Immediately*

John Boone's ideas translate well to the public realm, and he has worked in various media, such as a banner drawn against the sky by an airplane, engraved stone, or glass tiles on the walls of train stations. However, the traditional medium of painting collaborates efficiently with the language Boone selects.

*Effective immediately* (40 x 40"), a bright red painting with multi-colored letters ticking across the canvas at slightly above mid-level, alerts us. The viewer could believe that these letters portray a running information service and that a *Paradigm Shift* (30 x 30") is about to be made known to all. Some might hope for a *Sea Change* (30 x 30"), a more evolutionary process with a rich, magical result. A sense of optimism prevails.

This exhibition of new and older work by John Boone reaffirms and expands his ongoing project of over twenty years to speak to people in the words they understand best: their own. Without you having noticed, John Boone has been extracting readymade idioms and vocabulary from your mind, and repurposing them. He can do this with impunity, because he is invisible, but more about that later.

As the raw subject matter for his paintings, Boone collects words, turns of phrase and colloquialisms, which often coalesce around themes. His ear, a sense of trenchancy and an idea about what is pertinent guide him in the selection of language. His eye, a sense for color and order, and the presentation structure he has developed determine the outcome on the canvas.

His over twenty years of collecting phrases heard and read implies not so much their sanctioning as their savoring and acceptance. Boone relays words and phrases much as an American Regionalist painter or photographer of the Depression era depicted scenes from everyday life, in a nation inhabited by speakers of prose. His sensibility could also be compared to that of Pop artists, who cited pre-existing comics, commercial products or advertising as preeminent expressions of authentic American life. Others of his generation who established themselves as text artists during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as

Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, emphasize the poetics or political context of the text, or paired slogans or words with images. Boone's work has a different character.

The language Boone chooses can be quotidian to the point of wornness, terse, clear. Often, a sense of humor or fascination lurks behind the phrases, or their couplings. We suspect the choices must mean something more than meets the ear. Of course, the potential for wit or humor can extend to the person who owns one of these works, as the paintings will be inserted into an environment where the words can function as caption or comment, or conjure new thoughts and mental images.

Boone's simple lettering does not equate to easy visual dissection. The work arrives at the viewer in two different ways: as something to look at and something to read. It takes a while to break the work down and find inherent correspondences and playful or profound connections.

*All work and no play.. All in a day's work...Works like a charm...Working the room...* Such phrases themselves are incomplete without a sentence to house them. A recurring word or idea – in this case *work* - makes the phrases cling together as if magnetically attracted to one another. The two separate work-themed canvases in this exhibit (one multi-colored, one executed in grays; a pairing, not a diptych, both 108 x 48") pile the phrases into two towers, or tornado shaped funnels, or twisting torsos, ascending and descending.

At first glance, the repetition of phrases on these canvases is not obvious. Faced with either *work* picture, and after initially reading a few of the eye-level phrases, the viewer reassesses and is struck with the visual impact of a 9' tall canvas. What is the picture of, exactly? Do the columns of words possess a distinct silhouette? In both paintings, the second column of phrases is monochrome, and stands back from the brighter column to its left. Is the monochrome column an echo, part of a push-pull configuration, or maybe an afterimage? Recycling and restarting with each ellipsis ( . . . ), the columns of text are restless. Then too, each word trailing an ellipsis resonates, as if a pregnant pause occurs at the punctuation.

Time spent looking shows that two identical columns of work phrases approach

each other from the short ends of the canvas, mirroring each other in the center at *work sheet*. This particular meeting was coincidental, says the artist, but the lists of words could be seen to have quasi ledger-like qualities, as if simulating an accounting of terms collected, or an official record. Work itself can be a list of chores, a day-in day-out affair. The artist regrets with a smile that *workaholic* was not the center of the compositions, as the two large canvases did require diligent repetitive stenciling of the shapes that make up the word *work*. Work is serious stuff, so serious the artist had to paint two versions. (There are other pairings in the exhibit.)

Boone's painting is at home in the rubric of concept art, where an idea becomes the machine that makes the art. Having decided to select a phrase or word (or groups of them) from collections that have grown gradually over years, Boone maps a painting out using a stencil that he designed in the late Seventies to approximate the machine-oriented, utilitarian look of a digital watch or electronic info-board. This font never changes in size, no matter how large or small the canvas. Over time the font has gained a vintage quality, as its design bespeaks a now dated technology, set deliberately in contrast to the human foibles of thinking and language. The font's ultimately handmade nature also contradicts its aura of non-human electronic communication.

Once Boone has determined the concept of the painting, the execution becomes a foregone conclusion. The painting background is always a single color. Lately, Boone has taken to highlighting phrases, to promote readability, or varying his letter coloring to charge up a surface. Rarely, but sometimes, the artist corrects the pre-ordained plan according to his visual sense. Thus, Boone's work is a distinct expression of one contemporary drive to escape or forsake the narrative representational image for the world of ideas. Because of the readymade phrasings, the work never becomes a "picture of nothing." It always speaks, and not in a poetic or even original voice. An art work can be considered just that, a piece of work.

Boone considers his subject choices to make sure there is nothing too illustrious about them. The letters behave appropriately, as they pretend to no dimensions on their flat surface. Appearing in different guises, as noun, verb, adjective or phrase, the stenciled subject matter leads the viewer into a zone of thought, then, before

explaining, it quietly tip-toes away.

One reason to love this work is its lack of pretension. An early alter ego of John Boone was *The Invisible Guy*, the protagonist of an artist's book by the same name which he published in 1987, and again in 2000. This book was created during a time Boone worked at night in a technical capacity for a law firm using a 1980's mainframe computer with extremely limited screen visibility. Instead of doing only the work he was supposed to be doing (shall we say *Work stoppage Works for me*), he chose to create one page a day featuring the exploits of an invisible "guy". The guy was depicted as a reverse silhouette defined by his typeface environment – in other words, he was defined by the surface of the page left unmarked. Boone reminded his readers that the source for "guy" is Guy Fawkes, conspirator executed for his role in the Gunpowder plot, 1605, and that another meaning for the word is to josh or tease. Invisible Guy is an everyman character. He desires sex but plays saxophone, he is being pitched at with bat cocked at the plate, he leans nonchalantly against a wall under the skyline of New York at night, alone. On separate pages he dodges lasers and contemplates a glass of milk. Compared to Robert Longo's *Men In The Cities*, contorted as if absorbing an impact or shock, the Invisible Guy was less violently plagued by his existentialism, probably protected by humor and the modesty of shared suffering.

Seen in retrospect, this early artist's book establishes font as the "brushstroke" or mark for Boone. He clearly enjoyed exploiting the neutral givens of the keyboard to achieve an imaginative scene. Later in his acrylic paintings, the invisible guy Boone disappears entirely, except as a sensibility. Perhaps the tracings of the invisible guy's profile live on in the ascending silhouette of the *work* word towers in this exhibit. We might sense past and present corporate towers of New York, and the human presence of the working lives they determined.

Art conveys social knowledge, and it is historical. We count from 1 to 100 in Roman numerals (*I-100, 60 x 40"*). Time passes quickly. We become ancient with numerals. Can a canvas like *Sights (72 x 72"*) function as the summary of a life lived and envisioned? Will we remember why and when we used all of these phrases? And what we saw? With their speaking surfaces, Boone's paintings subtly locate and describe our lives with colloquialisms we may well have spoken ourselves.

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