

JOHN BOONE

READING, LOOKING, SEEING, THINKING

BY SHANE MCADAMS



JUST WONDERING

**ART, LIKE ALL LANGUAGES,
IS HIGHLY CODED AND
CONSTANTLY EVOLVING.
ITS CONTENTS ARE
RELATIVE AND ITS
MEANINGS FUGITIVE.**

When I teach this basic, if thorny, idea in my contemporary art class, my students take issue first with the idea that painting is in fact a language. When I finally convince them that it is, they go on to disagree with the proposition that language and meaning are inherently unstable. I tell them that with narrow enough context, on a short enough time line—nineteen years in this particular case—everything appears screwed down tight in the face of the coming eternity. I am compelled to remind them of the value of being old. As one's horizon broadens, the transience and subjectivity of all languages becomes more pronounced; meaning becomes relative, and existence becomes elastic enough to play with like Silly Putty.

Text is John Boone's Silly Putty. When I met up Mr. Boone, I had some superficial knowledge of his work, but I had no idea of the depth of his examination of language. My initial impression of his text-on-canvas paintings was that they were cheeky, clever, and hyperaware of those issues with which my students continue to grapple. After exploring his work in greater depth, it turned out I was right. His work is smart, but more importantly, it, like the artist, is also wise.

Boone moved to New York in 1975 when the jury was still out on whether New York would forever be the shining city on the cultural hill. I've always considered the choice to leave the hinterlands and live the dream in The City, as Boone did from Princeton, New Jersey, an important litmus test for artists. It was even more of a test of character and fortitude when Boone did it. Unlike the less-patient artists of today's art world, he developed at a time when developing was something to savor. As Boone put it, "During the course of my first eighteen years in New York, I went down many tangents. There was no choice in the matter; it was effort that needed to be made. When I started working with text exclusively in 1993, I knew I found the direction to go, and I knew I had found the subject area within which I wanted to work."

Boone, like many Downtowners in 1970's New York, took a less than direct route to his mature practice, experimenting with everything



from photography to performance. He traveled within various avant-garde circles in the art scene, absorbing ideas, letting ideas steep. For Boone like others immersed in the Downtown scene in the '70s, Art was more an attitude than a product, a process to be engaged in. No one knew what was going to happen. The MFA sausage machines were only warming up.

By the time they did in early '80s, Boone was already dabbling with text-based images that would be the rudiments of his mature work. These early works were received well by the late Marcia Tucker in an encounter Boone re-

calls colorfully. "It was obvious to me Marcia was curious enough to haul then New Museum curator Ned Rifkin with her for a studio visit. My work had made them both curious. Somehow that was enough, as nothing ever came of it. But it was a bit of validation at the time." As one might expect, validation from such a legend was a factor in his decision to pursue the direction in more depth. Even so, it wasn't before an eclectic period of experimentation involving a series of cartoons called *The Invisible Guy* and a series of high-tech door paintings that Boone's work took the shape we recognize today.

One of the first and most spectacular examples of his text-based work involved his commandeering of a plane to fly the message "HEY YOU," over the Rhode Island and Connecticut coasts on the Fourth of July, 1994. Boone recalls how he immediately caught a pang of rightness when the work went off. "The Fourth of July is a charged day anyway. It is the great equalizer for all citizens. My goal was to send a simple greeting to all. This was as direct a link as I could have made between my intent and the general public." Was it an incitement to consciousness for all witnesses or an absurd stunt meant for the



person next to you? "Yes." Medium and message merged, and Boone's work took metaphorical flight.

A few years later, for the show "Art in the Industrial Zone," Boone imagined another plane-towed sign that read, "Just Wondering," once again examining the intersection of public art and private thought, communication and introspection. He nearly captured the totality of language's fallibility, or slipperiness, in one poetically bold move.

These public displays thrived on the contradiction between the graphic resoluteness of text and the ambiguity of the sentiment it signified. They were further punctuated by the spectacular nature of the delivery. Though, as acute as the skywriting was, Boone's works on canvas are even more efficient and, as a result, often more piercing. They downplay the social aspect of his public work, leaving only the crispness of the text and the murkiness of its meaning to be wrung out by the viewer. His works on canvas and drawings on Mylar elicit an unexpected frustration in the viewer who struggles to quickly read the type—a typeface Boone designed to

appear high-tech and machine-made. It was engineered specifically to signify objectivity and concreteness, without necessarily facilitating those ideas in terms of communication.

A perfect example of this is "Drawing a Blank" from 2005, which simply, or not so simply, spells out the phrase of its title. In Boone's font, his first "D" looks like a "C:" followed by tightly kerned text that makes legibility difficult. This leads to a "blank" drawn in the mind of the viewer, painted by the artist, and declared literally by the text. It starts simple and gets more complex as it goes—like text does over time as well. Painting is a language.

Boone's "Speed" paintings work on a similar conceit, trumpeting aphorisms about speed, such as "INAHEARTBEAT," "INRECORD-TIME," and "AMOMENT'SNOTICE," gumming up the looking/reading process and almost artificially prolonging the engagement with the painting. Somehow Boone manages to have a say on the slow living movement even as he's tackling the broader epistemological issues around language and communication. He does all this with as few moves as possible. CHECKMATEINRECORDTIME.

Using text as subject matter isn't altogether novel. Artists from Picasso to Ed Ruscha have made raw text their content. But success lies in execution, even in conceptual work—especially in conceptual work. Boone's strategy relies heavily on the distinction between reading and looking; one is meant to read text and look at painting. These urges are destabilized when confronted with the painted text in Boone's work. Few artists using text are so clever, and even fewer are wise enough to understand how language works, flows, sculpts, and evaporates with time. To capture that metamorphosis in a succinct moment is difficult to pull off, and Boone does so like a Band Aid.

I think there is a tendency to dismiss work as nuanced and thoughtful as Boone's because it's covert. There's a profound irony to this. To dismiss is to read without looking, to look without seeing, and to see without thinking. Boone's work takes us on a long, short ride, or a short, long ride, depending on how you think about it—or how you look at it. **!**