

ARTSEEN

# Samuel Jablon: *Unstung*

by Ryan Chapman

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Samuel Jablon, *Comfort Can Fuck Itself*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 × 48 inches. Courtesy Freight + Volume.

Public language in the United States underwent something of a shift on November 8,

2016. Our new communicator-in-chief couldn't communicate—couldn't even form a declarative sentence without grammatical missteps—preferring instead a geyser of minatory invective. For the rest of us our vernacular—by remaining sane—became the language of dissent. Politics imbues every utterance: “Did you hear what happened?” “This is not normal.”

Samuel Jablon, who has employed text in his paintings since 2013, knows all this. He's retained his Beckettian optimism, but his youthful cheeriness has given way to a nonsense pragmatism, an acknowledgement of our collective daily mantra: “What must be done? We must do *something*.”

For the show at Freight + Volume, his third with the gallery in four years, Jablon is no longer adding the mixed media elements that characterized his previous work, squares of mirror and tile sourced from his mother's factory in upstate New York. He's abandoned the autobiographical materials for a painting show pointing in one direction: outward.

*Unstung* is comprised of sixteen oil and acrylic paintings, ranging from 14 by 11 inches to 66 by 60 inches. A single poem is written across the canvases and installed in nonlinear fashion. Every painting contains text on its own ground, in all caps and without punctuation. Where Mel Bochner and Christopher Wool yoke the viewer between letterform and image—demanding to be read, then to be seen, back and forth, back and forth—Jablon's letters swim among his shapes and fills. They carouse, overlap one another, and sometimes glow. Crucially, each work is titled for the words it contains. We're absolved from reading the words qua words; we needn't strain with the backwards text in *Comfort Can Fuck Itself* and *Death Is Elsewhere*.

Why this ambivalence toward legibility? Returning to Bochner—who has explicitly rejected the label of poet—one might infer the autodidact's need to be understood in the quick decipherability of his later paintings. (Roberta Smith said this created a bullying effect when grouped.) Jablon is less anxious. Poetry has long been central to his practice; he studied with Bob Holman in undergrad, and later with Archie Rand and Vito Acconci. With *Unstung* we can consider each painting on its own terms—assessing technique, color, and composition—while also considering the meanings within the gallery-wide text.



Samuel Jablon, *Half Destroyed Instruments Washed By Sun*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 57 × 43 inches. Courtesy Freight + Volume.

First, a note on those colors. *Unstung* has a vibrancy and tactility—the oils impastoed like frosting—that’s all the more impressive for its wide palette: the ochres and reds of *Half Destroyed Instruments Washed by Sun* and *Burnt By Sun*, which recall Chaim Soutine and Katherine Bradford; the riotous yellows and zagging squiggles of *Choices Blur with Rattlesnakes* and *Eat Disasters*, like something from an *In Living Color* mood board; and the jewel-like azures in the painting *Unstung*, floating in (or revealed through?) a blank, light wash. You have to be reckless or really confident to throw this much out there.

As for the show-as-poem, Jablon writes in the exhibition catalogue: “The phrases convey a sense of optimistic dread inherent in our current moment.” I would go farther. The phrases are utopian, in the sense of an impossible no-place, recalling the surrealist



sloganeering of France’s May 1968 protests (“Under the paving stones, the beach!”). I would welcome a mass protest with signs bearing Jablon’s *Abandon Cruelties* and *Whatever Happens This Is*.

“Optimistic dread” also highlights *Unstung*’s contradictions. *Oaths Against Dying* contains its impossibility—everyone dies, no matter how many oaths we make—and, through those ebullient brushstrokes, achieves something like hope.



Samuel Jablon, *Death Is Elsewhere*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 50 × 38 inches. Courtesy Freight + Volume.

So what kind of poem is *Unstung*? It’s up to the viewer. According to the catalogue some of the texts derive from advertisements and overheard conversations: a parsing of our shared historical moment. (A friend invoked Susan Howe’s poetry, which is apposite.) As for stringing the texts together, don’t look for instruction. Simply walk through Freight + Volume’s three rooms, creating your own associations, remembering

that the poem you're creating across the works will only ever exist in this gallery, in this moment.

*Unstung's* polymorphic nature across and outside of the paintings is the show's great strength. Where Richard Prince's joke paintings are deadpan, and where Christopher Wool's text works are blunt, Jablon proffers optimism and even political engagement. Sure, a painting like *Trouble* (pace Wool) will always be relevant to the day's headlines. But considered alongside *Honey on My Tongue*, *Death Is Elsewhere*, and *Eat Disasters*, and with those ecstatic color fields and squiggles, the show reads to me as joyful, capital-D Dissent.

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