

# Letter by Letter, Word by Word

By STEPHEN MAINE

Like good waiters, seasoned curators do their job without fanfare, then withdraw. They have the humility to realize that the real attractions are at the production end — the kitchen or studio — and that they merely bring the plates to the table. They allow no trace of the heavy lifting the process entails, and ideally nothing gets spilled. “Text Messages,” on view at Adam Baumgold Gallery, is a smorgasbord of 51 works by 34 artists, both gallery regulars and others, known for the prominence of words in their work. The understated order of Mr. Baumgold’s workmanlike installation provides a number of piquant moments worth savoring.

## TEXT MESSAGES

Adam Baumgold Gallery

His gallery is attuned to comics, and this show has its share. In “Blabette Takes Yet Another Vacation” (1991) the Francophilic Aline Kominsky-Crumb depicts herself contorting her lips to pronounce *grenouille*. She’s “trying to turn my New York sneer into a French pout.” In Daniel Johnston’s ink-and-marker study of sexual anxiety (untitled, not dated), the weepy, muscle-bound protagonist, swarmed by tiny pink women, wonders, “If I had all the girls in the world, what would I do with them?” Volunteers one, “Pizza sounds fun.” Chris Ware draws comics that foreground their narrative mechanics. “Rusty Brown —

*The protagonist wonders, ‘If I had all the girls in the world, what would I do with them?’*

Alice Meets the Rich Girls” (2005) is an example of Mr. Ware’s cinematic command of atmosphere, here in the service of class distinctions relative to art-schooling.

A few weightier works add ballast to this otherwise breezy exhibition. Adam Dant’s brownish ink-wash downer, “Departure Lounge” (2007), is the best of them. The London-based Dant depicts a train station bombing somewhere in the American hinterland that makes travelers twist like puppets and place names scatter like blown shingles from the big board: HARTFORD, LANSING, CARSON CITY, SACRAMENTO. Only the BVLGARI billboard is unscathed.

Abstraction has its moment as well. Lee Etheredge IV contributes three typewriter drawings, in which blocks of apparently random letters form complex, twisting



ADAM BAUMGOLD GALLERY

Felipe Jesus Consalvos ‘Arsenic Complexion Wafers’ (c. 1920-50); Ilona Granet, ‘Are You Mice or Men?’ (1989), top.

polygons reminiscent of the sculpture of Tony Smith. Their handsome angles are determined by the “space” key of the typewriter carriage. A materials-centric cluster of works includes “Arsenic Complexion Wafers” (c. 1920-1950), a collage by a self-taught Cuban-American, Felipe Jesus Consalvos.

A classical heroine of haughty demeanor is flanked by cigar labels, postage stamps, snipped photos of cathedral spires, and an oversized toothbrush. Tiny appropriated type ambiguously reads, “If you are a sufferer, we tell you.”

Taped-together strips of type droop like yarn from old spools in

Robbin Ami Silverberg’s work (2007). She retools the vocabulary of domestic labor, finding misogyny in the fabric of everyday life the world over. “Educated Woman, Stupid Housewife,” repeats one work apparently based on a Danish proverb. A strand culled from Indian folk custom reads, “Women are like shoes, they can always be replaced.” Blabette need not apply.

Vivienne Koorland, a South African-born émigré to New York, mangles the Palmer method in her painting, layering line upon line of labored, illegible script. One such work, “Poem Fragment” (2007) is included here, but it is upstaged by the compact “Wer R U” (2007), ominous in a heavy black wood frame like some minimalist/outsider Victoriana.

Message maven Jenny Holzer is represented by a small, untitled cast-aluminum plaque from her “Survival” series (1983-84) that reads: “FAT ON YOUR HIPS COMES WHEN YOU SIT AND LIE,” speaking to the anxieties of office workers everywhere. Other usual suspects include Ed Ruscha, who contributes two works on paper, the nicer of which, “OH’ in the Picture” (2005), depicts that most poetic of interjections smoldering darkly against a luminous, rubiginous horizon. Lawrence Weiner’s “Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky,” a wan watercolor from 1989, is as forgettable as its title; the wall space would have been better spent on one of Mel Bochner’s recent runaway-thesaurus pieces. Oh, well.

Among the show’s standouts is “Are You Mice or Men?” (1989), a key work by the underknown Ilona Granet. In the 1980s, this feisty East Village fixture produced a series of “Emily Post Street Signs,” castigating men for inappropriate behavior such as harassing women and urinating in public. Alongside a caricature of a couple of dapper gents rebuffing a ratty duo’s limp-wristed taunts, the text of this piece proposes “TALK RUDE, ACT RUDE: \$100 FINE.” It is a quixotic call for civility among strangers.

An accomplished painter who also oversees Williamsburg’s Pierogi gallery, Joe Amrhein is the smooth maître d’ of the Brooklyn gallery scene. He contributes a smallish 2003 work, “Media (Artforum, April 2001, p. 142).” In jaunty display type on hazy, layered vellum, it reads, “A GRAB BAG OF TECHNIQUES AND MEDIA.” Facile though it is to decelerate that Mr. Amrhein’s piece describes “Text Messages” as a whole ... well, whattaya know, it does.

Until August 15 (74 E. 79th St., between Park and Madison avenues, 212-861-7338).