

GRAHAM GILMORE

Painter | Toronto

≡ **THE WAY TEXT OPERATES** in your work is constantly changing. Words are voices, sources, or sometimes architecture. Is there a preconceived system to the way words figure in the work?

➤ The language has a double function. First there is the material gesture, where the nuts and bolts of the words are as important as the significations of the text. Interpersonal relationships and constantly shifting social dynamics are also important. It's about investigating our floating position in the world. Here something like carving the name of your high school sweetheart on a tree acts as a counterpoint to the indeterminate human connections afforded by language.

Ed Ruscha seems a likely progenitor of this kind of wordplay.

➤ Ruscha has talked about gravitating toward words with certain “thermodynamic” properties. When my son Elliott was five years old, he used to “listen” to the blank canvas using a stethoscope in an attempt to hear what the painting wanted to become. I often embrace certain inflections in words, as some kind of linguistic road kill or elegy to a lost loved one. It is important for me to incubate certain texts in my head for long periods of time before committing them to canvas or paper. Even then, they are susceptible to revision.

The story about your son reminds me of an early PR photo of you in hospital scrubs. It was a relevant image at a time when intestine-like organs filled with text occupied the background of your paintings.

➤ Actually, I see more of a connection to dentistry—grinding, extracting, cleaning, polishing—and the various oral associations, which is strange since my worst nightmare as a youngster was to become a dentist. My mother’s nursing books on internal medicine were an early influence. Other pivotal books included *Methods in the Art of Taxidermy* [by Oliver Davie, 1900] and *Genital Abnormalities: Hermaphroditism and Related Adrenal Diseases* [by Hugh H. Young, 1938]. An evolution from the body to a more psychopoetic realm has only taken place in recent years.

Paintings like Rejection Letter and Miracle Bracelet [both 2009] re-create what appears to be personal correspondence.

Every letter is contained in its own tablet or boxlike frame.

➤ The two paintings you mention use found sources. The letter in *Miracle Bracelet* was sent to me from the now incarcerated Pastor Bob Tilton, in which he offered prayers in exchange for money. Included in this form letter were a small container of holy water and a bracelet to be worn when filling the return envelope with cash. In general terms the letters of the alphabet are empty symbols until they are somehow encased, giving them an inside and an outside like a body. And contrary to the convention of letter writing, the paintings were constructed from the bottom up, as one does when laying bricks. Hence the illusion of each line of text seeming to recede behind the line following it, like tombstones diminishing into the distance.

There appears to be a major shift between the work you made during the period of your divorce and what emerged in the years following it.

➤ “Parental Alienation Syndrome” is a form of abuse where one of the parents intentionally damages their child’s relationship with the other. Richard A. Gardner, the leading authority on PAS, was a witness at my divorce hearing, but as courts tend to favor the mother in such cases, I lost custody of my son. I haven’t seen or heard from him in five years. I don’t know where he lives or what he looks like. He is now fourteen. My only option is to wait until he chooses to reconcile with me. To be demonized in the eyes of a child has forced me to address it in my work as delicately and truthfully as possible.

While your work gained recognition in Canada after the “Young Romantics” exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1985, you relocated to New York City soon after.

➤ For the past decade I have divided my time between New York and rural British Columbia. Strangely, the work I do in New York partly tends to reference nature from memory, but when I am in B.C. the artifice of culture takes over. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, spending summers on my father’s boat. Peering down through the dark, constantly moving ocean, searching for a mystery to emerge from the murky depths, and flickering surface lights all had a profound influence on me.



Consciousness slowly rising to the surface is in fact a metaphor for how I approach painting.

I hear that you're a jazz fan.

➤ Music more than art history has played an important role in my life. I would rather go to a club than a museum. Right now I am listening to [jazz drummer] Ari Hoenig's latest release, *Lines of Oppression*, but looped. I would like to paint his next album cover in an indecipherable time signature.

For some reason I can't help thinking of abstract video art in relation to your background methods. Your fluid enamel hues are saturated with the same lush digital tones to be found in the work of Jeremy Blake.

➤ The early "thought bubble" imagery was a result of combining experimental biomorphic forms (organs attached by umbilical chords) with what viscous paint does best: pours, puddles, spreads, drips, and expands. At that time, I was attempting to suppress my natural inclination toward



the “linear.” Despite modest stylistic shifts over time, I still believe that my aesthetic evolution has been incremental, with one painting leading to the next, and so on. The main difference between Blake’s art and my own lies in our chosen medium. At least his does not emanate toxic fumes.

I hear your father was an accountant and allowed you to practice on his large ledger sheets. As with the work on paper Turns On You, Turns You On, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 2003, don’t you still sometimes use ledger sheets as the ground?

➤ My first memory of compositional organization

was not my father’s ledger books, which I used to draw in, but the strategic positioning of color-coded pegs in the game *Battleships and Cruisers*. The game requires unconventional visualization in order to “sink” your opponent’s fleet positioned somewhere unseen on their board. Painting is a similar coded game between artist and self. There are times when I question whether my subject matter is appropriate and where the line should be drawn between private and public. Still, my position has always been to begin with personal observations and then watch how others react to them. *- Otino Corsano*



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