

SONG AND SUBTEXT

Painterly quotation in the work of Erik den Breejen
by Doug McClemont

Picture this: a man transcribing, with monk-like devotion, song lyrics and quotes from notable public figures. Words that float in our collective unconscious are no longer ephemeral; they're immortalized in paint. Recorded, if you will. From a painting by Erik den Breejen a double portrait emerges. The precisely realized text is not only a collage of intensely colorful abstractions that we call letters, but the words become a facial representation of the person who gave voice to them. Individual boxes are arranged and stacked like bricks in a wall, each as important as any other; without one the rest might fall. They work in perfect harmony.

*All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read heard overheard.
What else?*

– William S. Burroughs

The paintings in the exhibition bring to mind the “Cut-Up” technique of poetry and art making in which existing texts were cut into sections and those words to randomly rearranged to create an entirely new work. Pioneered by Tristan Tzara and the Dadaists and popularized in the 1950s by writers Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, (singers such as David Bowie and Kurt Cobain have also claimed to have utilized the method) the intrusive and systematic method was considered superior to merely writing poetry, as the finished cut-ups were given spontaneous new life and became, in a sense, authorless. Anyone can cut-up; we are all Shakespeare and Yeats. Burroughs took the concept that all writing is cut-ups to its logical conclusion by writing about Gysin’s cut-up writing, then performing the cut-up technique on his own paragraphs of writing on cut-ups.

A den Breejen work is a cut-up in the sense that the words are isolated from one another, but the words and lyrics are in fact painted

in the exact order in which they were originally written, spoken or sung. Working from the top of the canvas down, the artist faithfully makes his small rectangles, then sets the alphabetical creations down in paint. “I like the fact that you can access the same part of the song in different parts of the painting,” den Breejen says. This is crucial to an encounter with the works. We don’t “read” the words as much as get poked in the eye by them. Despite being orderly and true to the original, they jump out in random order, without rhyme or reason and without warning. “BEFORE” “SOMEBODY” “ME” and “FEELIN’”—it is cleverly impossible to make one’s eye land on the same spot for too long. Mundane prepositions unexpectedly come to the fore. The effect is rhythmic and impressionistic and human. Painted morsels from a firework-filled past.

A kind of memory that tells us that what we're now striving for was once nearer and truer and attached to us with infinite tenderness.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

Memories are further sparked by the famous faces we rediscover within the paintings. den Breejen transforms word into image as the bits fall into place. His portraits are mosaics of the thoughts of his famous subjects. Like 16th Century Italian painter Guiseppe Acrimbaldo who arranged painted vegetables to represent the face of a gardener, or an Admiral’s head made of sea creatures, den Breejen’s word-images simultaneously reveal a subject’s essence and visage. *Joan Baez (Diamonds and Rust (2013))* is a depiction in earthy tones, her eyebrows —“UNWASHED” “INTO”—are heavy with thought. Within his 2014 portrait of tragic songstress Karen Carpenter, it’s a sunny day behind her and her hair is, somehow appropriately, blue. Her words sing themselves.

The paintings are not just optical illusions, however. They tweak recollection while deceiving the eye. These handsome tributes go further than fandom. The artist’s remembered lyrics from troubled heroes are poignant effigies. In the newest series of 70s icons such as Liza Minnelli or Lou Reed the paintings are thick with pigment and emotion. Their poetic licenses are concrete. Liza’s portrait is made

up of hundreds of pieces of dialogue from the film *Cabaret* that were uttered by her ineffable doppelganger Sally Bowles. “FEEL” “BOOZE” “WHAT” “SIN” “IF.” Lou Reed’s androgyny is given wistful purple form with “GONNA” “WAS” “NOW” “PARENTS” “DESPITE.” Now viewers find themselves reflecting on their own relationships to any given song or snippet of dialogue. Where was I when I first heard this? How much do I recall?

Why do two colors, put one next to the other, sing? Can one really explain this? No. Just as one can never learn how to paint.

-Pablo Picasso

Arguably the most compelling aspect of den Breejen’s painterly homages is the interplay of color and idea. Experiencing the works evinces synesthesia, the rare condition of mixed sensation. A perception in one sensory mode conflates with another. A synesthete knows what red sounds like. “I’m making my own intuitive map of the music. Not necessarily a system but there are very direct relationships between the color and the music or poems,” den Breejen states, “the color of each work is a sort of key. Allen Ginsberg has an earthy green palate, Lou Reed is in the key of psychedelic purple.” Examining the works closely, often when a verse changed into a chorus or a bridge, the color also changes. But, as with Mondrian’s iconic 1943 work *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, music becomes color—and vice versa—but we can never really crack the code.

“I’m always relieved when someone is delivering a eulogy and I realize I’m listening to it. “

-George Carlin

Why do painters paint? is a comically unanswerable question. But we’re usually glad that they do. The wonderful obsession is given a voice and, of course, a face in den Breejen’s portrait of that original cut-up, Richard Pryor. In addition to its existential flavor, *Richard Pryor* (2014) is nostalgic, handsome and touching. The painting is a

centerpiece of the exhibition and consists of a visual representation of his legendary spoken words from Pryor's albums of the early 70s. Again den Breejen selects his subject for his cultural significance and the provocative nature of the words used to build the portrait. It's the dead comedian commemorated in a kind of stained glass. He is glancing to his right, not looking directly at us, which gives us permission to stare. We witness his colorful, off-color brainstorms. The man seems to be illuminated from within.

Life is the farce which everyone has to perform.

-Arthur Rimbaud

Erik den Breejen, it will come as small surprise, has a background in music as well as painting. "I did study music in my early college days," the artist says, "I performed with bands for a while, I've written songs and once made a sound piece, but have painted solely for the past three years." His painstaking and handsome paintings are translations of a sort. They give fresh permanence to a snippet of a script or dirty joke or heartfelt song lyric. Not that any of us, least of all van Breejen, will ever forget these people, but our shapeshifting memories require dusting and maintenance in order to perform. Our lives continue to overlap with these notable lives. den Breejen succeeds in making vivid impressions, and the paintings, with their Seurat-like fragments cohering brilliantly, reward prolonged viewing. The works are simultaneously mixed up and orderly, brash and refined. With optimism and precision, de Breejen revivifies the shift in 60s optimism to the all-too-aware hangover of the 70s. Liza, Lou, Joan, Marvin, Richard, Allen and the Stones are some of the revolutionaries honored. Like the paintings, these talents are colorful, cacophonous and complex. Put another way: they're more than the hum of their parts.

-Doug McClemont is a writer and curator based in New York.