

Wild Child

by Samuel Jablon

Words are ephemeral and concrete, confusing and clear, elusive and definable, and often shunned from painting. Words are left to writers who want to write, and readers who want to read. Who wants to read a painting? Paintings are supposed to be experienced, felt, and transformative. Erik den Breejen is a text painter, and his paintings are covered in words. He paints and plays with text, color, and the embodiment of music. His work uses text, obscuring it in plain sight and disguising it with color. His paintings are present, devious, embodied and disembodied. You are first drawn in by the comfort of the familiar, then you start looking, you realize there is more going on; there is humor, depth, and darkness.

There's a Riot Goin' On, is a solo exhibition by painter Erik den Breejen. A master of several disciplines, including singer/songwriter of his former band "Big Game", Den Breejen is above all a painter. His paintings play with a mosaic of text, color, pattern, film, comedy, and literature. He uses lyrics, quotes, jokes, and poems of celebrity figures from the early 1970s to express the collective - and sometimes tragic - conscience (and unconsciousness) of the time. The title of the exhibition *There's a Riot Goin' On* comes from the Sly & The Family Stone album (1971), the title of which was in response to Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971). In a combo punch to the face and gut, the paintings use text to create both mosaic-like portraits as well as project the voice of these cultural icons.

There's a Riot Goin' On takes a commanding look back at the early 70's and specifically explores the lives and work of creative revolutionaries such as Richard Pryor, Harry Nilsson, Marvin Gaye, Joan Baez, and Allen Ginsberg, among others. Den Breejen investigates the role of the artist as messenger from another state of consciousness. These artists, comedians, musicians, poets, and rock stars channeled their inspirations confronting the rules, norms, and state of affairs of their time. Den Breejen's subjects are radicals who engaged and tested the boundaries and limits of their generation, and his portraits revisit and transform these observations. He tells the history that has been recorded, portrayed, lived, and felt by those people. Den Breejen's technique can be seen as a kind of time travel.

The exhibition illustrates that things are not always what they seem, or, in Neil Young's words, that "there's more to the picture than meets the eye." The individual work discloses more than what is presented on the surface. There is an enticing phenomenon created by the large fields of text and color. The color and text clash yet blend forming a sizzling encounter. Falling into these paintings is easy, it is wanted. Slipping through the gaps between words, experiencing the

painting as a painting, as abstraction, is desirable. Words disappear, becoming unadulterated color, then becoming delicious moments of paint, and then the portrait reveals itself. This too can be said of the subjects themselves. Karen Carpenter, in reaction to the radical voices of the period, projected wholesomeness unmatched in her deeply troubled personal life.

The words are somehow extremely difficult to read albeit clearly written and obediently flow from left to right and top to bottom. Reading the text, you find yourself tossed around by moments of pure feeling; in blotches of color the text breaks from linear prose, while becoming more of a strange, idiosyncratic, even tactile poem. These paintings are filled with these instants, and soon the viewer is too. Flashes and jolts of experience, seize you, make you pause, reflect, look, think. Spend more time with me, they ask, let the letters and colors explain their content.

The early 70's were a radical time of unrest, where ideas about self, culture, race, class, sexuality, gender, individuality, and the environment were all being questioned and debated. The artists he paints are celebrities, superstars. Oftentimes they sacrificed their health, safety, and security for art. They risked everything. They were the game changers pointing out flaws in our society, and talking –in some cases screaming - about them.

The text in these paintings captures those far-reaching voices in a straightforward, raw, and ballsy way. The text in Richard Pryor's portrait, for example, raises the question that white people are becoming a minority. It cuts through politically correct politeness and punches you square in the nose. The text has no sugar coating, it leaves a real, in-your-face impression, because *There's a Riot Goin' On*:

Shortage of white people lately. I ain't see no white folks no more. Y'all stop fuckin'?!? White folks into yoga. You can't get no nut doin' no yoga. You got to get the pussay! They stopped fuckin' 'cause some rich white man came up to them and said, 'aw c'mon, cut the crap! Jesus Christ, there's too many people on earth! I have no place to ride my horsey!' There will be no shortage of niggers. Niggers is fuckin'. We got to have somebody here to take over. - Richard Pryor, "Shortage of White People."

In the same way that his Richard Pryor portrait is about race and overpopulation, Den Breejen's painting of *Allen Ginsberg ("Friday the Thirteenth")* (2014) is about the environment. The text equates earth pollution with mind pollution. Ginsberg shows us that our disrespectful actions towards the environment reflect our own mental, physical, and spiritual disrespect towards ourselves.

earth pollution identical with mind pollution, consciousness pollution identical with filthy sky, dirty-thoughted usury simultaneous with

*metal dust in water courses. murder of great & little fish same as
self besmirchment short hair thought control, mace-repression of
gnostic street boys identical with ddt extinction of bald eagle –
mother's milk poisoned as fathers' thoughts, all greed-stained over
the automobile-body designing table – what can poetry do, how
flowers survive, how man see right mind multitude, hear his heart's
music, feel cockjoys, taste ancient natural grain-bread and sweet
vegetables, smell his own baby body's tender neck skin when 60%
state money goes to heaven on gas clouds burning off war machine
smokestacks? –Allen Ginsberg, "Friday the Thirteenth."*

Many parallels exist between today and the decade of the early 70's. Many of the same problems exist. But now there is more of it all: apathy, corruption, corporate greed, addiction, and always more distractions. And rightly so this exhibition asks the question what is "revolutionary" today? Den Breejen's paintings let art lead us somewhere we have not been, providing us the platform upon which to challenge our beliefs. The icons and artists who Den Breejen painted were and are game changers. No rule-followers here. The exhibition evokes the energy of the early 70s, and asks us, maybe even sings to us, "What's Going On?"

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Den Breejen has been focused on paint and the tension of music, color, and text since he was in graduate school at Cornell University. His early work used text focusing on lyrics, albums, and musicians. Den Breejen examines the influences we feel by the lyrics and how lyrics suggest ideas. He then extrapolates the ways in which we believe certain romantic and philosophical "truths." In some of the work, such as the painting *Have you seen her lately (2011)* the text becomes nearly illegible, verging on subliminal messages, the viewer is forced to discover the plot. It is we who have to decide how to read this painting. Where do we start, on the top layer or do we make out what has been covered up? The text on top is clear enough, and it is possible to read. The way the text is layered creates a stimulating tension between what is readable and what has been obscured. The layers of melodies sit atop of each other in a multitude of color combinations, offering a visceral treatment to these iconic catchphrases, and through these layers a space is created for these lyrics to be viewed and read differently.

The lyrics Den Breejen chooses to paint snap off the canvas with a sting. The small ones are punchy, what they lack in size they make up in spunk. His paintings *You're Trying Too Hard (2010)* is a perfect example. The text in this painting reads "You're trying too hard to be what you already are." The quote pokes at you, it calls you out, and asks you (in a hippie way), to "*be who you are.*" The painting is layered and repeats the same text. It is a simple small painting, sophisticated and crisp. It goes straight right for your throat and when there, announces itself.

Den Breejen used lyrics to create similar mosaic-like portraits of musicians and songs. The paintings have a lightness of expression that is bold and intuitive, conveying the emotional power and the effect of music, the letters acting as musical notes. This lyrical emotive quality is clearly felt and seen in the painting *Good Vibrations*. The letters and colors seem to actually reverberate out into space. Unlike music, paintings do not revolve around time. They are “on” all the time frozen and complete in space. There is no off switch, no volume control, and no way to turn them off, to stop. They are always “on.” Always transferring vibrations of color and form. It is almost possible to feel the melody and beat of the Beach Boys song, *Good Vibrations* in Den Breejen’s painting, *Good Vibrations (2011)*. It is loud, colorful, and booms off the wall filling the entire room.

The Wall (2008) is a giant word-block or bricked wall of text. It is reminiscent of a color field painting, but with more subtle touches of joy and humor. It does not reverberate out, but rather is calm and solid. It is a physical wall, hanging at a sizeable 80 x 102 inches. In a staggered grid, Pink Floyd’s lyrics cover every inch of the painting. But the grid is not made out of concrete, it is made from lyrics, and because of this it sings, sways, bends, and flows across the canvas. The text has the same enticing phenomenon as the most recent paintings in *What’s Goin’ On*. It is so easy to plunge into this wall of lyrics, being carried through it from corner to corner, picking up a word here and there. The experience is like a nasty serenade. The painting sings the song of a lost stranger looking for a lust-driven dirty woman.

Den Breejen did not intend to create jazz paintings or paintings like Stuart Davis, who wanted to replicate the spontaneity, improvisation, and freedom of music. In his early work, Den Breejen captured music by condensing the tone, lyrics, rhythm, and experience into paint. He presented music as paint.

The portrait, whether it be song lyrics, album covers, or a person they all are subject, the color is subject, and the text is subject. Everything in Den Breejen’s paintings is essential -- all the fat has been trimmed. These paintings present themselves as raw as they are. They are sensations, experiences, and histories. Den Breejen offers us history told by the artist, a history that is learned through first hand experience, a history by people who made history, and a history by people who challenged the status quo. Den Breejen offers us a pure visual experience. He offers us music in the form of paint. He produced eye-candy that packs a punch, and asks us to keep going, to keep reading, to keep looking, and to keep questioning what’s going on.