

Looking for Love in a Looking Glass World

by Paul Laster

If a picture's worth a thousand words, why would an artist want to paint language? Prior to the Cubists, not many did; since then, words have been important subject matter for artists working in every medium. Nowadays, we are equally at ease with words in art as we are with images. Yet the use of language, as opposed to imagery, still represents a form of creative rebellion—and what better pop stance of upheaval is there than rock 'n' roll.

Erik den Breejen, an artist and musician, is fascinated with song lyrics. He uses them as subject matter for his colorful paintings and drawings—depicting the lyrics in handmade block lettering and script writing on painterly grounds. The block lettering is inspired by punk rock record covers, where type often looked like ransom notes. The blocks are used to graphically capture a catch phrase, such as “We got the power now motherfukersz, It's where it belongs,” which is pulled from “The W.A.N.D.” by the Flaming Lips' or to obsessively cover a canvas with nearly every lyric from a song such as Roxy Music's “Mother of Pearl.” When script is used to construct the words, it either boldly floats above the ground like a neon sign (as in the painting *Suicide City*, which is titled for a Doctors of Madness song;) fills empty blocks (as in the painting *The Girls from the Streets*, with words plucked from a Scott Walker tune) or gets interwoven above and below the block letters (as in the painting *David's Last Summer*, referencing a Pulp song.)

Popular rock music, including glam, psychedelic, progressive, proto-punk and indie, is the artist's preferred subject. Den Breejen is attracted to love songs expressing desperation. He identifies with the romantic and social angst of singer/songwriters such as Elvis Costello, Morrissey and Elliot Smith—the more emotional the lyrics, the better. Den Breejen says that when he has a moving experience, he thinks of a song that goes with it and then begins a new work. He questions whether the emotion is responding to a remembered lyric or the lyric is describing the emotion. In his hands, the painting language and the lyric language become one. For example, an overly expressive lyric provokes an expressionist painting. The work of art becomes an accumulation of actions without a clear vision of the completed piece. Compositions vary from modularly stacked words, forming towers of Babel, to lyrics playfully rendered on minimal, geometric, and expressive grounds.

Den Breejen has a good memory for lyrics. For a recent spoken word performance, he recited the entire lyrics from Pink Floyd's 1979 double-album “The Wall.” Presented without music and stripped of the stage, lightshow and film context, the lyrics were delivered in a deadpan manner within the framework of a gallery. The intention was to let the words be heard. Den Breejen appropriates songs to say what he wants to say. Songs often get used more than once and in different ways. The lyrics from Pulp's “Like a Friend” have already appeared in

two paintings. The first is a vertical canvas, where red, white, orange, green and blue words are layered in script and block form on a field of bright yellow. The complete song lyrics are reproduced, frenetically bouncing around the canvas with sections like “kill me baby” and “feel my age” popping out. The second version is a horizontal painting resembling a billboard or homemade sign. It’s rusty ground is covered in red script and overlaid with the repeated lyrics in light and dark blue blocks—some filled with letters making words and others framing the cursive text. The placement of the lyrics constructs both a visual and mental game that creates new meaning.

There is an aspect of fandom involved in the work, but Den Breejen is not focused on the personal lives of the performers or on their greatest hits. As with the transformation of any subject matter, his is an interpretive role. It begins with a passion, but in the end the formal elements carry the day.