

Ron Terada: TL;DR

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Instagram Will Begin Blurring 'Sensitive' Posts Before You Can View Them

Ron Terada's new exhibition takes up two central components from his practice of the past twenty-plus years: painting text on otherwise monochromatic canvases, and appropriating commercial signage as sculptural gestures. Like other second-generation "Vancouver School" artists with whom he is often grouped, both critically and in exhibitions (Steven Shearer, Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy McLeod, Tim Lee, Kelly Wood, Brian Jungen), Terada makes work that departs from the dour materialist critique to be found in the first generation (Stan Douglas, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham). Here, for example, on one wall of the gallery are 26 white paintings, of various sizes and tightly arranged like tiles. The paintings all purport to be headlines from the website *The Verge*, and thus instantiate the exhibition's title, *TL;DR*, which, in Internet vernacular, is a shorthand way of indicating an article was too long and so one did not read it. That is to say, Terada's title is a symptom of our age of digital distraction and short attention spans.

The paintings refer to headlines also called "clickbait" because of how they try to grab a reader, compel her to click on the link, thereby monetizing hyperbole and superficial, if not probably fictitious,



scandal. Ranging from the banal narcissism of social media (such as *Instagram Will Begin Blurring 'Sensitive' Posts Before You Can View Them*, 23 March 2017, 10:23 a.m., 2017) to au courant anxieties about technology and politics (such as *A US Ally Shot Down a \$200 Drone With a \$3 Million Patriot Missile*, 17 March 2017, 10:13 a.m., 2017)—the paintings' titles are also their messages, along with, presumably, a timestamp for when the headline appeared on the website. A crucial difference, however, is that while *The Verge* uses Adelle and FF DIN for its headlines, Terada has chosen a more bespoke font, Cheltenham (used by *The New York Times* and LL Bean, the gallery pamphlet tells us, also adding that *The Verge's* font "is terrible").

Terada has been making text paintings for better than two decades: early works I saw of his in the 1990s included paintings of high school yearbook quotes (his *Untitled (Grey Painting)* series from 1996-1997) and the questions-as-answers from the TV gameshow *Jeopardy* (the *Untitled (Jeopardy Painting)* series from 1997). In all of these works, including the paintings in the present exhibition, Terada combines the highest level of painterly attention – where text is now the matter



to be conveyed in a meticulous fashion – with the most rigorous conceptual conceits. But the font-switch of these new paintings also connects to Terada's other works with signage and commercial design, which have included everything from fabricated roadside signs welcoming visitors to Vancouver or, facing Detroit from Windsor, *You Have Left the American Sector/Vous Êtes Sortis Du Secteur Américain* (2005), to riffs on Spaghetti Western posters (*Today It's Me, Tomorrow It's You*, an exhibition at Vancouver's CSA Space in 2014).

Two other components of *TL;DR* continue these more direct interests in signage and design: they are set off in another room but only partly finished so you have to step through steel studs to view the series of 18 logos printed on posters for a previous Terada exhibition. In this series (*Big Toast Logo #01-18*, 2016), corporate logos of a certain 1960s modernist minimalism are displayed, from the signs for Canada Trust and the National Film Board to The Toronto Zoo and Loblaws. Those logo's clean lines, layered over an image of headphones plugged into a laptop, evidently speak to an aesthetic nostalgia: *this is what design used to be!* they seem to declare.

But what nostalgia do we have here, exactly? Here a white neon sign, also in the exhibition, may provide a clue. *Being There* (2011), while evidently predating Donald Trump's election last year, also points to a narrative of a total idiot becoming US President (*Being There* was a 1970 novel by Jerzy Kosinski, made into a film in 1979, directed by Hal Ashby and starring Peter Sellers). Is the designerly font nostalgia to be found in Terada's paintings and prints akin to the "Make America Great Again" clickbait of Trump and his followers? Or, conversely, is it a mistake to read such nostalgia in so straightforward a manner? It is rather the gap or contradictions at work here that matter: between the signs on the *Big Toast Logo* series and the poster image; between the clickbait and the luxurious font; between the neon sign and its electronics that are visible in the exposed walls. And then, too, we have to turn that reflexive reading back onto the supposed idiocy of Trump and his followers – the "deplorables." Perhaps they, too, are not so idiotic, not so nostalgic.

Terada's exhibition comes at a time when, in the fall of 2017, Vancouver is witnessing yet another "return of painting" season, with exhibitions, symposia, and other attempts to challenge the hegemony of photography in this town. Nostalgia for painting, nostalgia for clean design, nostalgia for America: troubling as it may be, this is how left aesthetics and right politics seem to inhabit similar emotions, certainly all of this cannot be laid at Terada's feet, and must, his work suggests, be thought through in a properly dialectical fashion.

Clint Burnham is Professor of English at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. He has written recently on Rodney Graham, Walker Evans, and Dana Claxton. His most recent book of poetry, *Pound @ Guantánamo*, was published in 2016 by Talonbooks. His next book of criticism, *Does the Internet have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture*, will be published in 2018 by Bloomsbury.