

Ron Terada

Catriona Jeffries Gallery

If there's nothing new under the sun, then all works are woven from the tissues of other works. This holds true whether an artist is explicitly quoting, alluding and parodying, or whether he is only an accidental thief. Such sampling, such intertextuality, is most obvious in literature (indeed, to be saddled with the label 'literature', a certain degree of reference to classics may be required). So it is gratifying to see, in Ron Terada's latest exhibition at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, parallels between contemporaneity and recent art history played out in the arena of the written word.

'Jack' (2010) is a series of 24 canvases, each one a magnified page of text, which Terada copied from a memoir written by the Canadian-born artist Jack Goldstein (who killed himself in 2003, shortly after publishing the book). From high school doldrums, to the so-called CalArts Mafia of the 1970s, to Goldstein's eventual departure for New York, the memoir is a gossipy, insider account. Names are pelted at the reader with an almost comical insistence that the author was, indeed, at the centre of things: Jackson Pollock, Richard Jackson, Richard Serra, Irving Blum. All the powerful art ghosts of that moment are assembled (plus Woody Allen and Diane Keaton, for good measure). And, if Goldstein's account of those formative years is tantalizing for a certain set of gallery hopper, it's actually banal as a strict narrative. Goldstein gives us, as Alan Bennett said about history in general, 'just one bloody thing after another'.

'Jack' is hardly a straight piece of storytelling, of course. Indeed, with 26 lines of text on each page/canvas, most viewers will simply snatch at the narrative in a piecemeal fashion. Even though the words on any given canvas pick up from the previous one, suggesting a strict clockwise reading of the works around the gallery's main room, it's unlikely that, in practice, anyone reads it so assiduously. Rather, 'Jack', en masse, delivers a kind of semiotic blur, from which lozenges of literal meaning are issued. To exacerbate our reading, Terada's canvases are painted in black acrylic, with white lettering, which, in magazine circles, is called 'reverse type', a style that's largely discouraged due to its illegibility. The eye strains and only wants to read a sentence at a time.

About this review

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Given this visual static, and given, too, the scale of the text and its insistence as it surrounds the viewer (or gangs up on them?), the words of Goldstein's memoir may abandon their literal meaning and become shapes, or bricks for larger shapes, instead. The shape of a paragraph, of a sentence, or even of a word, becomes a kind of discrete form; it is at once married to and divorced from the literal thing those words, sentences, and paragraphs signify. They have become strokes of paint – pointing out, perhaps, the codex that lives in all paintings, the specificity of the finished work as a thing made from a million preconceived possibilities (be they colours, lines, or letters). Then again, Terada has delivered a kind of anti-painting. The art-making went something like this: each canvas was painted white, then vinyl lettering was applied on top; a coat of black covered it all; and, finally, the vinyl letters were painstakingly removed, to reveal those virgin, white letters. What we read is actually the negative space surrounded by a massive encroachment of paint that has left only the slightest of patches untouched – and these empty patches are the things we call letters, these unmolested spaces are what we read.

Text-based art is, by now, crucial to Terada's 20-year practice. Perhaps most prominently, he has installed a massive, illuminated work outside Vancouver's Central Library, which reads: 'THE WORDS DON'T FIT THE PICTURE.' Terada knows that the tension between 'words' and 'pictures' is both real and not real. And 'Jack' is testament to the way we read pictures, the way we see words.

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Frieze

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