

ARTS & LETTERS

# Mel Bochner's Torah

Paintings that tell us to eff off while showing us the way in

BY JEREMY SIGLER

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**T**HE TOTAH GALLERY IS SO NEW THAT WHEN I WENT TO GOOGLE Earth to check its address at 183 Stanton St., I discovered the East Village Wine and Liquor Store still advertising itself in big, shiny red letters. When I ventured to the Lower East Side in person, I found that indeed the liquor store was no more. In its place was TOTAH's inaugural exhibition, featuring two art historical greats Mel Bochner and Alighiero Boetti, duking it out in a kind of painterly slam. I walked up to the newly renovated double storefront exterior and peeked through the roll-up security grates at artworks that looked like they could have been on loan from any major museum.

(In case you haven't heard, the Lower East Side, aka LES, now resembles all the other boutique neighborhoods in the five boroughs. There are only a few remaining signs of its past bohemian and lower-class, lower Manhattan, lower-income, low-rent population. How long, I thought, until the laundromat gets converted into a trendy, subway-tiled oyster bar?)

The art on the walls was neither the ready-to-sell merchandise typical of any young start-up gallery nor the constipated bureaucratic programming organized by a museum staff committee working in tandem with a highly motivated PR team. This show was a refreshingly independent gesture by the gallery's owner, David Totah, who had the bright idea of pairing the seminal American conceptual artist

Mel Bochner (at the ripe age of 76) with the late Italian conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti (who died of cancer at the height of his career in 1994). As compatible as these two artists turn out to be, Mr. Totah is apparently the first person in the laboratory of contemporary culture to pour them both into the same beaker and watch them bubble and fizz.

In close proximity, each artist comes alive. One can sense Bochner's sly subversion, his exciting and menacing wit, his willingness to bite the hand that feeds him, while sensing Boetti's softer, more introspective play of linguistic ciphers, in color combinations and textures that are as palatable as they are innocent. Set off against Boetti's complex poetics, we can feel Bochner's irreverence, insolence, vulgarity, confrontationality, irony, and rage. With words like "Blah, Blah, Blah," "Just Shut the Fuck Up!" and "\$#!+" (which subliminally spells out the word "shit"), Bochner's paintings pose as the type of anchorman that programs our minds and plays sophisticated corporate games with our most impressionable emotions and desires. Many of his paintings are candy-colored and would seem to give us mental cavities. His bright, almost cheerful air-freshener palette creates a context for words that convey a sarcastic tone of insipid positivity. In *Thank you*, he seems to mean the opposite of what he says:

THANK YOU!  
THANKS ALOT!  
THANKS A MILLION!  
THANKS FOR  
EVERY THING!  
I CAN'T BEGIN TO  
THANK YOU!  
I CAN'T THANK  
YOU ENOUGH!  
THANKS AGAIN!!

In his galling painting from 2000 *No*, Bochner seems to mean exactly what he says. He produces a sludge of stenciled black-and-blue painted letters on a smeary velvet

ground that suggests a moldy shower curtain. The painting's persona conveys the voice of an alcoholic with rotten teeth literally telling us (me in this case) to go "fuck off" and "drop dead."

NO, NO WAY,  
NO HOW, NO  
SOAP, NOT  
A CHANCE,  
NOTHING  
DOING, NEV-  
ER HAPPEN,  
FUCK OFF,  
DROP DEAD,

But why take it so personally? Bochner's paintings are more or less machine-made. He uses stencils and recycled phrases, and even when applying letters and numbers by brush, his paint application is as rote and regulated as a sign painter's. In the striking catalog created for the show, Bochner describes his technique in a way that exposes just how "on" he has to be to produce the impression of being so off:

In my paintings on velvet, the paint is delivered indirectly to the surface. First a computer-controlled laser engraves the text into an acrylic sheet, which will serve as a printing matrix. Then, letter-by-letter, the words are hand-filled with pure oil paint, sometimes up to a pound per letter. Finally the velvet is laid face down on the plate, placed in a hydraulic press, and subjected to 750 tons of vertical pressure. ... These unruly variables result in viscous pools of paint, letters oozing into one another in lush, unpredictable ways: "delete" morphs into "purge," "blabber" into "drivel." The text, like life, bleeds out to the edge of the frame, leaving us with nowhere to go except in.

As the language here shows, Bochner is more than just capable with words. His description of his own work is as visceral as the paintings themselves. But there is also poetry in the way Bochner leaps mid-sentence from describing the mechanical

to the metaphysical, "... leaving us with nowhere to go except in." The quote shows the high seriousness of Bochner's industrious engagement with process, and it makes me question what he is really after. Is he interested in saying something in order to sell something or selling something in order to say something?

One of his more awkward pieces is not included in the TOTAH show but left a lasting impression when it was shown a few years ago at the Jewish Museum's impressive Bochner survey. In its pastel light, bright tones of cutesy acrylic, it appears like wallpaper in a preteen's bedroom.

FART, PASS GAS,  
STINKER, BREAK  
WIND, WHIFFER,  
WINDY POP, RIP  
ONE OFF, BOOM-  
BOOM, SILENT BUT  
DEADLY, WHO CUT  
THE CHEESE?,

Windy Pop?! I've never heard that one before. Bochner doesn't exactly write, he manufactures stylish and fun lists of synonyms. In this way, his paintings function as collections of vernacular. He lets the words do the talking (or communicating); he lets language occur via an external phenomenon, thus connecting him to the school of postmodern L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and conceptual poets with roots in dictionary surfing.

In the contrapuntal TOTAH show, Bochner's "boom boom" gets repeatedly neutralized by Boetti, whose paintings (without actual paint) have less the authenticity of art and more that of artifact. Boetti's works are not adolescent, they are distinguished; they are not juvenile, they are mature. Consider *Il progressivo svanire della consuetudine* (The Gradual Vanishing of Habit, 1990); or *Le cose nascono dalla necessità e dal caso* (Things Are Born of Necessity and Chance, 1988); or *Ammazzare il tempo* (Killing Time, 1984) which reads like this:

A Z E E  
M Z I M  
M A L P  
A R T O

This piece, and others like it, hung salon style in TOTAH's show, is anything but confrontational. It is introspective; its Italian is timeless, artful, spooned from a melancholic, metaphorical, and melodic poetic tradition that goes back to Dante, who wrote in the *Inferno* lines like “We were men once, though we’ve become trees.”

Unlike Bochner's oozing letters of cold, harsh, impersonal dictionary debris, Boetti's feel sincere. They are carefully embroidered in neat color blocks of nursery-school letters that read in rhythmic downward columns. They are dreamy as throw pillows—a nuanced, delicate world of animated and lyrical intelligence, vast hallucinatory space and an epic sense of time, in a highly reduced and compressed verse. Each truism makes a soft landing on the mind. The most memorable of these embroidered artifacts is one from 1988 that serves as the TOTAH show's title. In it, Boetti's Italian, once translated into English, reads “words fly away what is written remains.”

V V T I A  
E O S P N  
R L ■ T E  
B A C A N  
A N R M T

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Bochner and Boetti have a great deal in common. Their names both start with B, and they both happen to have been born in 1940. Neither artist is chromophobic (afraid of color). Both artists are *lingua amorous* (in love with letters). But most of all, both artists began in defiance—against art's traditional status, privileges,

preciousness, and value. Both were proponents and practitioners of a new conceptual art that sprang up in the 1960s counter-culture, challenging ornamentation and commodity. One can hear an echo of Adolph Loos's 1910 manifesto "Ornament and Crime" in Douglas Huebler's 1969 statement, which has become the mantra for '60s conceptualism: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."

Bochner was from the get-go a rebel. His art was disembodied; it had a skeletal, zero-percent-body-fat integrity. And it was clearly against making conventional paintings on canvas. He was certainly one of the first to use the gallery's floor and walls as a blatant component of his art. He installed ephemeral, temporary works, emphasizing the gallery as a liminal setting for experimentation.

Like so many other artists of his generation, he was heavy on investigation and light on fabrication. Consider his work *Measurement: 180 Degrees* from 1968. In it, he uses a nail, a short piece of twine, and a stick of charcoal to draw a protracted semi-circle on a small section of the wall and then labels it with the measurement of "180°" in his tidy handwriting. This wall drawing, like those from the same time done by Sol Lewitt, is not figurative or felt (as one normally thinks of drawing in art) but mechanical, mathematical, engineered. And to make this single arching line last, Bochner turned to the camera rather than the canvas. He was one of the first to recognize photo-documentation as a vital element in capturing and encapsulating ephemeral, dematerialized artworks, which would otherwise be nonportable and thus lost.

Bochner also helped usher in a vogue of philosophy and theory in art. He helped make conceptual art a distinctly intellectual, scholarly, and writerly practice. Brainiacs like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Marx informed his thinking and helped shape his very cerebral body of work, influencing him to use techniques of extreme reductivism and often absurdist logic. Consider one of his most seminal wall paintings from the 1970s, which began as a simple statement written on an index card. It reads as part note-to-self, part *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "1.) Language is not transparent." Here Bochner seems to say that language is always

obscure, always murky, always lost in translation. In this wall painting, which has been reproduced many times (as if from a kit with a set of instructions), words are scribed by hand in chalk on a drippy patch on the wall of black paint. It is truly one of the first works (up there with Magritte's 1928–29 *The Treachery of Images*, which claims "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*") to interrogate art and replace images with words.

Yet no matter how logical and stripped down (and noncreative) Bochner's early work was, it has always retained a painterly, or artist's touch. While this is now an obvious mark of his full-bodied, lush paintings ("viscous pools of paint, letters oozing into one another in lush, unpredictable ways"), it was harder for critics to discern back in the '60s when Bochner was more or less protesting lyrical, gestural, romantic traditions of excessive personal expression and affectation. Nevertheless, there was the undeniably gorgeous penmanship of his earliest graph-paper drawings. In her review of a show for *Art in America*, Eleanor Heartney wrote: "In Bochner's work, perception constantly trumps idea, reaffirming the artist's belief that the sensuous is an essential element in even the most conceptual art."

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Alighiero Boetti also began as a conceptualist-cum-sensualist. In his Italian vernacular of idea-art, he pioneered the *Arte Povera* ("poor art") movement, which was intended to bring the dignified, arty art object (be it a painting or a sculpture) down from its pedestal. When Boetti emerged in the late 1960s in Turin (with fellow artists Luciano Fabro, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, and Michelangelo Pistoletto), he was at war with the high end, producing a new radical low-fi art through the utilization of cheap industrial and clerical supplies such as plaster, postage stamps, and ballpoint pens.

Unlike Bochner, whose home base was always New York, Boetti remained a foreigner not just to New York but to Italy as well. Boetti, you might say, was a foreigner to the Eurocentric narrative of modern art in general. He expelled himself from the Western canon of modernism as if going into exile. Acutely

aware of the shifting geopolitical situation of the third world, he traveled regularly to Ethiopia, Guatemala, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, where he stayed for extended periods and embarked on long-term projects. For about eight years in the 1970s, Boetti had the idea to hire local refugee women to work for him embroidering a body of work he called "*arazzi*," tightly compact word-grids, put on stretchers and hung like small paintings on the wall. Boetti, in a way, created a poem factory that would provide humanitarian relief while creating his own art market. It may not have been like Warhol's factory, populated by drag-queen groupies strung out on speed, but it was equally original and economically symbiotic.

We can feel Mel Bochner's irreverence, insolence, vulgarity, confrontationality, irony, and rage.

In the catalog that TOTAH published for the show, it is hard not to see the striking parallel between both artists who use laborers to manufacture their work: On page 8, there is a photograph of master printer Amy Prior at work "buttering the plate" of a large-scale Bochner print. And on page 10, there is a more controversial snapshot of a little Pakistani girl in her salwar kameez, sitting with an even younger child embroidering a bunch of Boetti's *arazzi*. There is a published discussion in the show's catalog that includes Andrea Marescalchi (a.k.a. Bobo, who was Boetti's main draughtsman and managed the production of the factory) and Randi Malkin Steinberger, a photographer who visited the refugee camp in the 1980s and documented the women and children at work embroidering the *arazzi*. Both reveal that it wasn't the women, but men, who decided what to write, and that "women had a limited role in the understanding of the meanings of these tapestries." We learn that "Their most important concern was supporting their families" and that Boetti helped them survive in very difficult conditions as refugees in Peshawar. "It wasn't an assembly-line production system," says Bobo, "The men in charge would distribute the drawings to be made, which were sent from Rome, and each family was given a certain quantity of threads to work with."

It sounds like a win-win situation. As refugees are paid for their labor, Boetti gets a project that allows him to claim intellectual property in being one of the first



conceptualists to successfully dissociate art making from hands-on originality and creativity.

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If Bochner and Boetti are both poets, they are poets who publish not in books but in artworks. Boetti farmed out his words to subcontractors in Afghanistan and Pakistan who may not have even understood the words they were weaving, while Bochner farms out his words to assistants and to himself, donning the hat of a sign painter (it is no coincidence that Bochner's father was a sign painter). Bochner and Boetti manufacture words that will not fly away but remain. Art, it just so happens, is a good way to secure the future of a relatively compact piece of intellectual real estate. By securing a bit of art property (i.e., a painting in the collection of a major museum) one certainly stops a chunk of language in its tracks, so that it will not go through one ear and out the other.

Regardless of which hands actually make the work, Boetti's pretty little square patterns of words, which are balanced in color and shape and soft as furniture, slowly lead us on an encounter with meaning. First, we discover in the reds, greens, pinks, light blues, and oranges the letters of a romance language, which we may then organize into a phrase. And we are likely to be pleased by the discovery of this phrase, which is often a play on words that allows us to participate in solving a riddle and or puzzle. The phrase is eventually excavated, as if being brought back from the dead, from antiquity. The embedding of language into materiality and materiality into language creates a warping of time. We are no longer in the moment.

Bochner, on the other hand, has spent much time on the instantaneous interpenetration of image and word, or as he says, "looking" and "reading," and his poem-paintings at this point in time feel very much alive and present. In his text "Some Thoughts on Color, Language, Painting, and Blah, Blah, Blah" he expresses the ongoing challenge of expressing himself:

In the palimpsest of languages, German shadowing English, English obscuring German, the text is frequently reduced to illegibility. By later paintings in the series, the words often dissolve into little more than a fog of color, diverting the text from any duty to meaning. In addition, the optical antagonism makes it a struggle to decipher the text, reenacting the very situation described in the quotation. Decoupling the eye from the mind raises an even thornier question: Is it possible to *look* at the painting and *read* the text simultaneously?

Bochner continues:

From Aristotle, who thought of color as a drug, to Derrida, who thought of it as a poison, color has always represented excess and danger. It creates a surplus meaning, one independent of my intentions, which survives the reading of the text and continues to engage viewers long after they get the idea.

Caught up as he is on this thorny subject, Bochner achieves something very rare: His paintings have a voice, and they seem to talk. He does this by using what he calls “Strong Language,” the title of his recent show at the Jewish Museum and subsequent exhibition catalog. He speaks in this strong language by creating a tone shift: What begins as an impersonal mono-tonal list of dictionary terms shifts to a kind of raging persona, which is personal and revealing. It’s as if he is letting us in on some inner artistic secret but at the same time showing us his contempt for our curiosity and for the communion of false legibility. The artwork breaks through by expressing just how fed up it is.

But when Bochner says: BEAT IT!!!! in the fourth line of his 2012 painting *Go Away*, prominently featured in the TOTAH exhibition, he may actually, paradoxically, be saying come closer, engage with me. The poem reads:

*GO AWAY!!!*

*GET LOST!!*

*BLOW!!!!!!!!!!*

*BEAT IT!!!!*

*FUCK OFF!!*

And yet, the harrowing condition brought to a place of tension feels something like being yelled at or dressed down. The reader's mind goes numb. Try sending a text message in all caps with exclamation marks: You won't hear back. And so now people are so appalled by negativity that they provide little emojis after every sentence to give constant reassurance—to massage the message.

One glance at Bochner's titles and we see how accepting the man is of bad karma. *No, Un-able, (Small) Fart, Nothing, Meaningless, Money, Useless, Crazy, Contempt, Obscene, Die, Ridicule, Irascible, Fucked-up, Babble.*

Boetti, on the other hand, speaks of “languid murderous glances” and “killing time” or existing “between a rock and a hard place” or experiencing the “the gradual vanishing of habit” or hearing about something by “word of mouth” or evolving as a being somewhere “between dog and wolf” under what is “sometimes moon sometimes sun” in a “crazed but not confused” state, ready “to melt like snow in the sun.”

Here is where I feel Bochner is way out in front of Boetti. Bochner's paintings tell us to fuck off while showing us the way in. They seem to talk to each of us personally as if they know us. In his unprecedented painting *The Joys of Yiddish* (2013) he courageously goes where few artists (or poets) are willing to go. And when he installed the words on the exterior of the Haus der Kunst in Munich in gigantic yellow letters he went so much further. The mural reads: “Kibbitzer, Kvetcher, Nudnick, Nebbish, Nudzh, Meshugener, Alter Kocker, Pisher, Plosher, Platke-macher.”

Five years earlier, in 2008, Bochner produced a painting titled *Jew*. It might be the painting Bochner is ultimately best known for—the work that keeps us the farthest out and lets us the farthest in—the one that is simultaneously the most opaque and the most transparent—the one that comes closest to a being a complete lie, a

complete fabrication—utterly irreducible, irrefutable, incontrovertible, incontestable, undeniable, indisputable, unassailable, unquestionable, indubitable, unarguable, airtight, watertight. It reads:

Jew, Hebrew, Semite, Israelite, Israeli, Judaist, Talmudist, Kabbalist, Rabbinist, Hasid, Pharisee, Hebe, Yid, Yiddle, Hymie, Izzy, Yarmulke, Rootless Cosmopolitan, Lox Jock, Shylock, Sheeny, Mockie, Kike, Jewboy, Hook-nose, Snipped Dick, Christ Killer,

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Jeremy Sigler's latest book of poetry, *Goodbye Letter*, was published by Hunters Point Press.

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