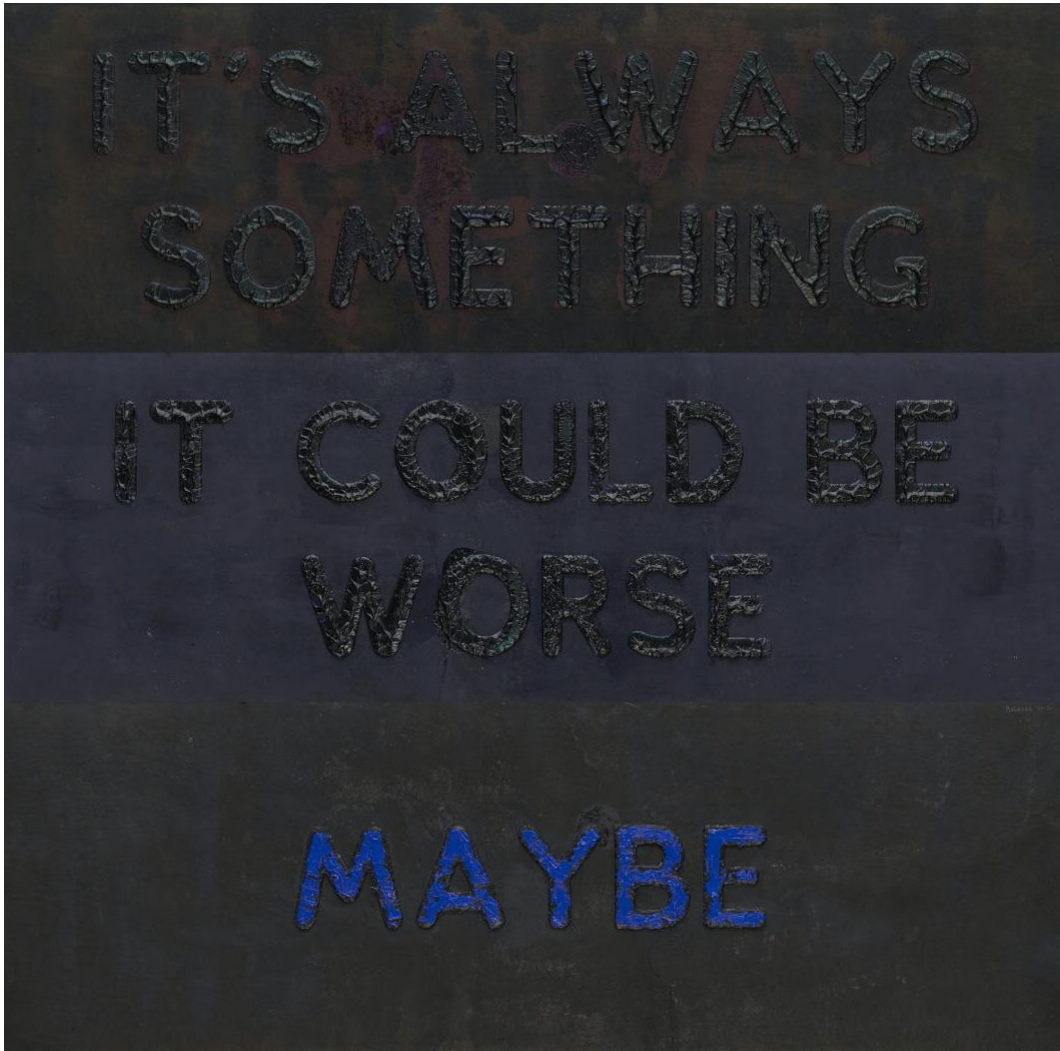


Mel Bochner: *I STILL DON'T GET IT*

By Tom McGlynn



Mel Bochner, *It's Always Something/It Could Be Worse/Maybe*, 2022. Oil on handmade paper in three parts, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy Totah.

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Mel Bochner's extensive aesthetic investigations into language and syntactical systems of thought and vision have typically been filtered by the artist's flat-footed sole of wit. Consider an early work such as *Language is Not Transparent* (1970) in which the title phrase is numbered "1" (a primary notation) and written freehand in chalk over a black painted ground which drips coincidentally from its uneven bottom edge. The work is both declarative of language's conceptual dependence on a phenomenological support (something needed to be thought about or upon, in this case a painterly support) while at the same time expressing a rather see-through statement.

Over the course of his career Bochner's art has evolved from a skeptical, anti-subjective conceptualism that valued an austere tactical reframing of aesthetic conventions, towards his more recent work, which appears a transparently subjective gushing of hyperbolic invective. His wit has, since around 2006, transformed from an earlier pragmatic and notational type of analytic disinterest towards an almost too-interested deployment of populist vernacular. Instead of questioning aesthetic convention, in his most recent work Bochner offers conventional skepticism and common disbelief as a subject in itself. The work is still quite conceptual, but shrilly ventriloquized via a colloquial stalking horse.



Mel Bochner, *Here We Go Again/I've Had It Up To Here/I Can't See Where This Is Going*, 2022. Oil on handmade paper in three parts, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy Totah.

Consider *In Other Words/It Goes Without Saying/Don't Make Me Laugh* (2021) in which these phrases are messily printed in violet, blue and yellow over stacked bands of variegated yellow-green, blue-green and gray. The first two statements casually cancel each other out as dueling clichés, while the last is expressive of a disdainful witness. The whole is made very physically present in its multiple processes of oil monoprint, collage and embossing on handmade paper, the resultant bleak chorus sounding like a dissonant combo of Jenny Holzer's truisms, Ed Ruscha's offhand non-sequiturs and John Giorno's late, incantatory signs. Another 60 by 60 inch work, *It's Always Something/It Could Be Worse/Maybe* (2022) expresses a more equivocal statement which is translated phenomenally in pronounced black and blue lettering on corresponding undersaturated purple, ultramarine, and black horizontal bands—the blue reserved for the indeterminate determination: “MAYBE.” This piece retains a subtle reference to the anxious small talk that might derive from a random meeting of strangers unwilling to come to any possible confrontational conclusions—language, in other words, that simply fills up an awkward social space.



Mel Bochner, *Expletive*, 2021. Oil on velvet, 30 x 90 inches. Courtesy Totah.

Bochner materially drives home the essential failure to communicate that lingua franca might paradoxically engender. Similarly, *Here We Go Again/I've Had It Up To Here/I Can't See Where This Is Going* (2022) expresses a frustrated will to engage in constructive dialogue. In this instance the text is almost entirely whited-out and then partially outlined against a background of amorphous smudges of undersaturated orange, violet, and blue. As in the previous works, the gestural color array serves as analogy to the opacity of understanding at large. With *What's The Big Idea?/Are You Out Of Your Fucking Mind?/Maybe Not* (2021) the artist could be seen to be lampooning his own artistic roots in conceptual art, as the “big idea” of countering aesthetic convention via semiotic displacement was activated early on by Bochner and his contemporaries such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner. And the idea of being “out of one's mind” has the potential to expel one from inner-directed speculation to the unstable exterior of a phenomenal encounter. The final phrase is anything but final, as it expresses a contradictory, open-ended potential and its foreshortened impossibility. Expressed in random-sized white, red, and purple text on electric red, violet, and yellow bands, this piece is the most flag-like in the artist's standard 60 by 60 inch format. Departing from that format is the 30 by 90 inch *Expletive* (2021),

in which a string of cartoon expletive symbols are shakily printed in Day-Glo red on a chartreuse velvet support: a ploy of the unmentionable gets the full Bochner treatment.

While it's tempting to extrapolate from the artist's shrill concatenations here a corollary for our present socio-political ecology of rabid hyperbole and vituperative invective masquerading as transparently free speech, one might more productively consider how Bochner's work demonstrates that common language isn't so common after all, and that its specific affect expressed via embodied phenomena might be the clearest way to understanding all sorts of failures to communicate.