

DOCUMENT JOURNAL

FEBRUARY 11, 2020

ABOVE THE FOLD: SAMUEL JABLON AND MARK FLOOD TALK DIRTY WORDS, HEDONISM, PSYCHOTROPIC DRUGS

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The artists find common cause in slowing down the 'Chelsea shuffle.'

Even though their work is drastically different and there are three decades between them, Mark Flood and Samuel Jablon share a common thread in their art: the written word. In their work, words have the power to provoke, amuse, and entertain. Pieces by Flood and Jablon were recently juxtaposed against one another last year in the exhibition *Dirty Words* at Mindy Solomon Gallery in Miami. Jablon, who studied poetry in addition to painting, used gestural brushstrokes, imbuing his canvases with bursts of bright colors and phrases like “Sun Sun Sun”—an homage to the Miami heat, “Pleasure,” and “kcuf,” an anagram for “fuck.” Flood’s contribution to the exhibition included documents from the art scene in his hometown of Houston, like a large copy of a typed letter from the Museum of Fine Arts Houston recruiting members and an enlarged reproduction of an award check. Flood currently has a show at Karma in New York titled *Protest Signs* from 1992, while Jablon has an exhibition at Nancy Littlejohn Fine Art in Houston, until February 22. Jablon and Flood met to discuss their practices, the use of words in art, and censorship.

Mark Flood: My first question to you is, have you ever been censored? Because I’m looking at your painting that says Fuck. Has anybody ever had any problem with you?

Samuel Jablon: That I’m aware of, no. Yeah, no galleries or magazines, from what I know.

Mark: You use bad words, but that’s pretty standard. Probably what’s really going to make you objectionable is your art seems kind of hedonistic. A lot of people want art to be sort of puritan, like a big dose of castor oil. Do you ever do get any resistance that way? You must have.

Samuel: Yes, especially earlier on, when I was just kind of starting out. There was always a lot of support, but there was also a lot of people telling me the work sucked. Pretty consistently. And [to] stop doing it.

Mark: Wow!

Samuel: There was a lot of people who didn't like the fact that there were just words in the painting. So they wanted it to either be a pure abstract painting, or just written text on its own. Not as a painting.

I got that a lot in the beginning. Since then I think people kind of accepted that this is who I am, what I'm going to do. But people are either into it, or they're very against it, and there's no middle.

Mark: Your story reminds me of that period of artists' lives where, when they meet people, the people feel like they need to give him or her critical advice. They're like, no you can't do this, you can't do that!

But in the end, you really don't have much of a choice what you do. You just make your art. Rodney Dangerfield tried to sell aluminum siding for 20 years, but he had to go back to comedy.

Samuel: I did not know that.

Mark: One of my favorite art paradigms. I was gonna ask you why is the text backward in your paintings?

Samuel: I'm always looking for things that slow down how people read it. So, it's not like you're able to instantly read the text and move on. I was trying to figure out ways to slow people down so they actually end up looking at it as a painting maybe, before they actually read it.

Mark: What about that left-to-right thing? It used to frustrate me that people would read text, and English-speaking people read it left-to-right. And you have to deal with that.

Samuel: People want it to be left-to-right. But it's not such a concern of mine because I flip language around so it's upside-down, mirrored and backward. Oddly enough that's what people are drawn to the most, initially. The ones that are more difficult to read and kind of challenging are what people are immediately drawn to, from my experience. Then the really easy one, people are like, 'Oh, I get it.' They accept it and move on.

Mark: That's what I think we are always up against, the people who want to move on. I also find it in the shows themselves. That's why I always like to put furniture and stuff in, just so that people will stay longer, to try to get them captivated.

Samuel: That makes sense. I've been curious why you always have couches in your shows.

Mark: I used to call it the Chelsea shuffle, when people just walk in, look around, and walk out, and say, 'I saw the show!' It dismayed me. I thought about how convenience stores are designed so if you're robbing the store, there's not a quick exit. You have to go around stuff so they have more time to identify you and film you. I kind of feel that way about exhibits. I want to get people stuck in there. And in New York, furniture is a great way to do that, because New York is always about 200 sofas behind people's need to sit down.

Then I decided to start having mattresses on the floor so people could really look at it from a different perspective. Those are three different heights and three different modes of existence. I found all those experiments very gratifying. I'm afraid people are going to start living in the gallery if I make it too comfy. I don't think New York galleries realize how hateful they come off, but they look pretty fucking hateful. They're so into their little hamster wheel.

When I'm looking at your paintings in our show, there are so many of them that are hedonistic. Like the one that says, 'Nothing Bad Happens,' the one that says 'Guiltless,' the one that says, 'Sun Sun Sun.' So I get an 'art is pleasure' function, from your art, as opposed to the 'art is a guilt trip to remind me people are suffering in the world.' The kind of art you're supposed to be making!

What is your defense? Pretend you're in a show trial. You're on trial in Moscow, or it could be in front of the Whitney. Defend yourself!

Samuel: I sort of came up through an activist poetry background. One of my teachers was Amiri Baraka, who was the Poet Laureate of New Jersey, and New Jersey got rid of the poet laureate [position after he was appointed] because he was a loud-mouth activist who would refuse to stand down and used art as a weapon to create social change. I totally respect that 100 percent. And I think art does have that power.

As a young poet, I was interested in making political, work and at some point, I started feeling like it was opportunistic. So I started making art about life. I decided it was better to have a politically active life and let my art be what it is.

Your question... I wasn't expecting that!

Mark: What? We're doing an interview for Document, and you weren't expecting that?

Samuel: No. I feel like there's always this duality to my work. Where a lot of the time, there's a darker meaning to a seemingly pleasant image like the phrase, 'nothing bad happens.' So flawed, right? Like, bad things are constantly happening all over the place. And just like saying, 'nothing bad happens' is a lie. But then you deal with the colors, you deal with the painting, and it has this sugar-coated pleasure to it.

Everything else seems so bad in the world, it's just like: how do you play with that? I decided to not feed into it.

Mark: I hear you. You just let your intuition guide you.

Samuel: Definitely, intuition has been more the guide than anything else.

Mark: The 'Sun Sun Sun' one is really good. As I look at these paintings, a lot of them look like you've gone back in, to change the color, especially of the words themselves, but also the background. It looks like you're increasingly concerned with color.

Samuel: Yeah. These paintings have been kicking around the studio for about a year. They're slow. Sometimes they happen really fast; the end result is usually a pretty quick gesture. But they kind of just kick around. I'll change colors, and scrape it down. I'll

change the colors and attack it, thousands of times. I'm always looking for a sort of balance where it's all fucked up and the colors are all flashing, but it's in a balance.

Mark: Yes, yes, I think you achieve it. Some of these are really powerful. I'm not showing with you just because you're a rising star and I'm a burn-out. I actually like this stuff. I'll testify!

'Half Sunset,' I thought that was a weird one in many ways. For starters, you spell demon like you were in a death metal band.

Samuel: I thought it needed to be the old school way.

Mark: Yeah. It's funny because when you say, 'Half Daemon, Half Sunset,' it looks like you're opposing those things. Like 'Sunset' is the epitome of goodness, and 'Daemon' is the epitome of badness. Or is that some expression I just don't know about?

Samuel: I have those two phrases written down on something, and I put them together. It's meaningless, but it's also half horrible, half beautiful.

Mark: Yes. To me, it's the most difficult painting in this group. I'm most resistant to it, but for that reason, I'm kind of into it.

I like Kcuf. There's so many paintings that say 'Fuck,' or 'Fuck you.' I can think of a Jack Pierson. I'm pretty sure there's a John Waters. It's almost like a contemporary art standard, the 'Fuck You' painting. Most art I like, it has a fuck you attitude. But yours is just 'Fuck,' so it's a lot more like childish graffiti, the dirty word for itself. I'm sort of focusing on it, since the show is called Dirty Words, and it's literally the only dirty word of the show.

Silence...My questions make people shut up instead of talk.

Samuel: They're challenging. You're saying things are against the grain but it's not a bad thing. I think we're in a kind of a moment where everything's a duality. It's like you're either pro this or you're against this, and I think art suffers in those moments.

Mark: Yeah, definitely.

Samuel: This work of yours in the show, I didn't know it existed. They're all about Houston, right?

Mark: Yeah. It's all from one particular show from the '90s. I was doing my version of a Hans Haacke, about the Houston art scene. It was my first show in a commercial gallery. I wanted to do a portrait of the Houston art scene so I just got one or two documents from every institution. I reproduced them in silk-screen on canvas.

It's all words. There's one that was a Menil handout. There's one that's the MFAH's fundraising letter. There's a gossip column from the paper about the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston. There's an award check I got from the Boston ICA.

So that was my deal. It was a one-time experiment on a massive scale. I was such a whiny bitch about everything, it's almost an embarrassment to remember it.

Samuel: I like the slide sheets.

Mark: Bill Arning, our curator, wanted to include these two paintings of slide sheets from the same show. Back in those days, everybody's art was slides. You had to have your slides, and you used slides to apply for a grant, to apply for a job, to apply to get into a school. It kind of made me sick, like everything does. So I said, 'I'm not gonna make paintings anymore. I'm just gonna make paintings of slides.' I would get slide sheets, and make silk screens of them. And print that life-size in the middle of the blank canvases, and I liked it.

We found two of these in my storage. I've had a lot of fun going through my storage working on my 90s book.

Samuel: So, why are you going back to the '90s?

Mark: Well, I was in the hospital and had surgery not long ago. I felt like I was on all these psychotropic drugs, though maybe they aren't really psychotropic. But they were to me! And my higher power, Mescalito, started telling me stuff to do about my art career. I was already working on a '90s picture book, but he said I should get Clark Flood going again and make it a textbook with pictures. So I've been doing that ever since. I've been working on this book, and I'm going to focus on that from now on, at least for a couple of years. I'm just gonna put out '90s work.