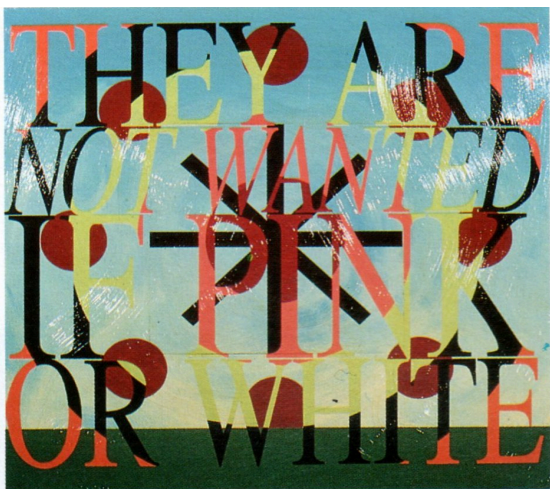


# Flash Art International

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ELEPHANTS, 1992. ENAMEL ON COTTON DOCK, 66 X 66".



LATIN, 1992. ENAMEL ON COTTON DOCK, 66 X 66".

Matthew Abbott's rigorous paintings are both visually and verbally *loud*, broadcasting their asserive words and their bright paint jobs at equally high decibel levels. While they may very well end up taking place in the historical lineage of word art, these works seem to be substantially resistant to any limitations put on them from the outside — although their self-imposed boundaries are flaunted to the point of outrageousness. Abbott's pictures deal with so many of the concerns and problems that painting faces today in such a *taut* conceptual format and profuse materiality that one is immediately struck by their ability to maintain their composure — his paintings scream their heads off without losing their temper. They are complicated puzzles of which the "pieces" are easily distinguishable: a geometry-based patterning, a painstakingly tactile and colorful physical surface, and an enigmatic text literally put through hell by the paint itself. Deliberately crammed to the point of rupture, these canvases fend off the formulaic and predictable by maintaining an overall fever pitch of intrigue, a conspiratorial act pulled off right in front of the naked eye.

The text embedded in each painting obviously is the first trace of a code that ultimately involves all of the other aspects of the picture, and — in keeping with the level of twisted pretense — it is easily cracked when it is learned that Abbott culls his phrases from *The London Times* crossword puzzles, a "distraction" that still fascinates yet frustrates him because he can never finish one. Abbott turns a particularly sharp, well-written "clue" into the actual text of the painting; the "answer" becomes its title. If he can't figure out the answer by the time he's done with painting, he "cheats" and looks at the key. For example, a painting that tells us that "The French can give tongue" is titled *Latin*, a word which in the larger context of the painting has almost nothing to do with the depicted phrase. This painting squarely lands in a space where French kissing and French theory (remember that?) play a game with the number 5 which, by the way, refers as much to Demuth (or Johns) as it does to the number of letters in the answer. But even if you get all of this "right" (of course, without the grid structure and rules of the crossword you may not "get" it at all), Abbott's work — the term has recently been applied by Yve-Alain Bois to Ruscha's word-paintings) in the medium of aptly-named "interference" paint, which optically changes color as the viewer moves in front of it. Abbott understands that painting (not to mention the viewer) probably has to work very hard these days to hold anyone's attention, which may not necessarily be its fault, but it is definitely its quandary. The fact that many young artists like Abbott are reinvestigating and reinvigorating the medium is a good sign — it may not yet be readable, much less answerable, but it keeps the game going.

these paintings demand continued close attention from their viewer/reader/contestant with an undulating, built-up undercurrent of gesso in which the written message fights to survive.

Abbott's paintings are as formally self-contained as the crossword puzzle itself, operating self-consciously within all of those standard "limits" of the picture plane: flatness, framing edge, etc. (He even paints the swirls of gesso with the forthcoming geometry and text in mind.) Exposing Greenbergian formalism as only another pastime, as much of an avocation as doing the crossword, Abbott uses his paintings to demonstrate with particular wit how much vision relies upon speech and vice versa. In his most recent paintings, Abbott has played down the "hot" color but has added more "visual noise" (I'm using this term as an oblique reference to Ruscha, whose paintings clearly figure into a discussion of

TERRY R. MYERS

## MATTHEW ABBOTT

### FAWBUSH



Matthew Abbott's word paintings entangle system and order in optical playfulness. Borrowing phrase clues from the *London Times* crossword puzzle, he paints them in variable lettering and clashing colors. As poetry, the phrases are succinct and mysterious; painted, they are accessibly Pop and vertiginously Op. Words are set into grounds of fractured, raking forms and interspersed with dots or crosses that act like they, too, must be readable. In fact, they serve to confuse, jerking the words back and forth between textuality and visuality. So, simply looking at this work, picking out what's what, is an act of decipherment not unlike that of solving a puzzle. Abbott's paintings are carefully, even fastidiously composed to convey an impression of frenetic activity within a neat decor. In *Abash*, the text clue ("It's A Heavy Blow Shame!") bulges out in a big, ponderous script reminiscent of that found in late 60s psychedelic posters; but the ball of letters is symmetrical — paced, albeit whimsically, by dots; measured, albeit irrationally, by troughs of color.

These are not arid exercises, despite their appealing precision. For Abbott deploys downright weird color combinations that provide the vibrant music to this ingenious variant of concrete poetry. In *Paris Green* ("Pigment That Makes Some Frenchmen Envious") there is a blaring array: glittering lavender and gold, sky blue and navy and orange. Abbott's playroom is garishly decorated. But his punchy adolescence is just a thin veneer over a knowing allusiveness. In eight smaller works titled *Twister*, Abbott provides his own set of answers to clues posed earlier by Josef Albers, Larry Poons, even Roy Lichtenstein. Painterly gesture is frozen in modeling paste beneath acrylic gridded into neat, shiny dots. What makes the works come

alive is the color, delightfully unfettered and, as in Albers, combined and recombined to provide a systematic exposition of color's enormous versatility.

**Faye Hirsh**