



'Tu Stultus Es'



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LOW 60 HIGH 80

## Are words art? Take in a gallery show curated by Dave Eggers



The noted critic Gotthold Lessing once famously affirmed that mixing words and art could only lead to “confusion of media,” and thus the two forms should strive to “avoid each other.” That was way back during the Enlightenment, but the attitude has lingered ever since. *Lots Of Things Like This*, a show at Apexart curated by the literary phenom Dave Eggers, plays like the reverse imperative of the same idea. The show was organized—by Eggers and Jesse Nathan, a cohort and editor at *McSweeney’s*—according to a set of rules that call for: 1) art composed with an image, 2) some words (usually referring to the image), and 3) a sense of humor.

The guidelines apply to works by some 40 artists, including an illustrious bunch of historical compatriots (Francisco Goya, Marcel Duchamp, Georges Braque, Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb) and younger artists who made show-specific work with the particular rules in mind.

Critics have long loved to pontificate about what forms art can take, not to mention which forms are most appropriate. These days, with so many mixed media in play, such questions have become evermore tangled. But contributing to the “bastardization” of art by injecting a narrative element, on the other hand, is a worthy goal with an illustrious pedigree. In Eggers’ show, an influence-cataloging façade tagged “Blame Them” features works by a posy of precursors (Basquiat, Warhol, Magritte) who employed words in their art in variously referential or ironic ways. One example, a bemusing illustration by Saul Steinberg, features a phalanx of bearded gnomes walking in tight formation, wearing sombreros and dark glasses, outside a building emblazoned with the words “The National Academy of the Avant-Garde.”

But notes for the show, titled *A Brief Origin And Explanation Of This Show*, also

spell out other constraints. “The text had to be narrative.” And then, it wasn’t to be “used obliquely or as a design element.” But if text and art can coexist meaningfully in the same work, why dictate what form that marriage should take? Why can’t words serve a narrative function and also work as a “design element?” That’s what makes for the seditious thrill of experiencing language when it is hijacked, reprocessed, embedded, and hybridized.

No matter how the rules apply (or don’t), there are considerable delights to be found in Eggers’ show. Nedko Solakov’s deliriously droll ink-drawn series *To Be (Or Not To Be) Different* tackles questions of deviance in graphic narratives featuring aliens, roving armies, and existential quotation marks. Another good one, by Maira Kalman, is a painting with the ironic caption “Spontaneous me,” sans Whitman” painted on the same surface as a painting-within-the-painting portrait (of Walt Whitman or Kalman herself, it’s hard to tell).

Eggers isn’t the first writer to grapple with the connection between words and art. Tom Wolfe, for instance, argued that abstract art depended on a kind of “verbal contamination” in the form of theory. But to his credit, Eggers passes over theory and gravitates toward works that are funny, mostly in a Dadaistic vein. The first piece in the gallery is a stark Raymond Pettibon drawing—of a penis—pointed in the direction of the other works, with the header “Forget the meaning. Just enjoy.” Then there’s a Paul Hornschemeier illustration of two kids conversing over ice-cream cones. One boy asks the other, “What’s your favorite flavor?”

“Your mom,” says the tot, wise beyond his years. —Noah Sudarsky

The show will run Tue-Sat through May 10 at Apexart, 291 Church St b/w Walker & White Sts.