

## Curator Hilton Als and the Language of Silence

Observer caught up with the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, critic and curator to discuss the art of words and the role of queer identity in "The Writing's on the Wall" at the Hill Art Foundation.

By [Dian Parker](#) • 02/13/25 10:52am



Ellen Gallagher, DeLuxe, 2004–2005; Grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoints with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving; some with additions of plasticine, watercolor, pomade and toy eyeballs, 15 $\frac{1}{3}$ × 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches each, 84 $\frac{3}{4}$ ×178 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches overall. © Ellen Gallagher, Courtesy Gagolian. Installation view © Hill Art Foundation. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio

There's a lot of discourse today around the context of art. What was the climate when the art was made? Was it produced during the dark Inquisition years or the more tolerant yet still political Renaissance? What country, race or ethnicity can we link to the artist? What political, social or economic statement are they making? And the curator—what thoughts, feelings or inquiries are they trying to prompt with the exhibition? Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, critic and curator [Hilton Als](#) is known for his sharp, deeply contextual explorations of art and culture. A. His [Joan Didion](#) show, "What She Means," at the Hammer Museum in L.A. in 2023, gave us historical, political, social and symbolic representations of her writing. He has curated other wordsmiths like [James Baldwin](#) and painter and writer [Celia Paul](#) with that same eye. And his current show, "[The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts](#)" at the Hill Art Foundation in New York, is an example of this contextual braiding par excellence. Hilton Als with Tilda Swinton. Madison Voelkel/BFA.com



The group exhibition, on through March 29, includes sculpture, photographs, printed zines and video installations—all of which consider the relationships between communication and language. In it are works by [Ina Archer](#), [Vija Celmins](#), [Sarah Charlesworth](#), [Ian Hamilton Finlay](#), [Ellen Gallagher](#), [Joel Gibb](#), [Paul P.](#), [Rachel Harrison](#), [G.B. Jones.](#), Jennie C. Jones, [Sherrie Levine](#), [Judy Linn](#), [Agnes Martin](#), [Claes Oldenburg](#), [Ronny Quevedo](#), [Umar Rashid](#), [David Salle](#), [Rudolf Stingel](#), [Cy Twombly](#), [Steve Wolfe](#) and [Christopher Wool](#).

Silence and its antithesis are key elements in "The Writing's on the Wall"—these works show silence, erasure, blank spaces, as well as crammed worlds like [James Joyce's](#) stream-of-consciousness writing. There are Cy Twombly's scribbles of Greek and Roman texts, often with only splotches of color and blurred lettering. Juxtapose Twombly with Christopher Wool's stenciled text in bold black—one is whispering, and the other shouts.

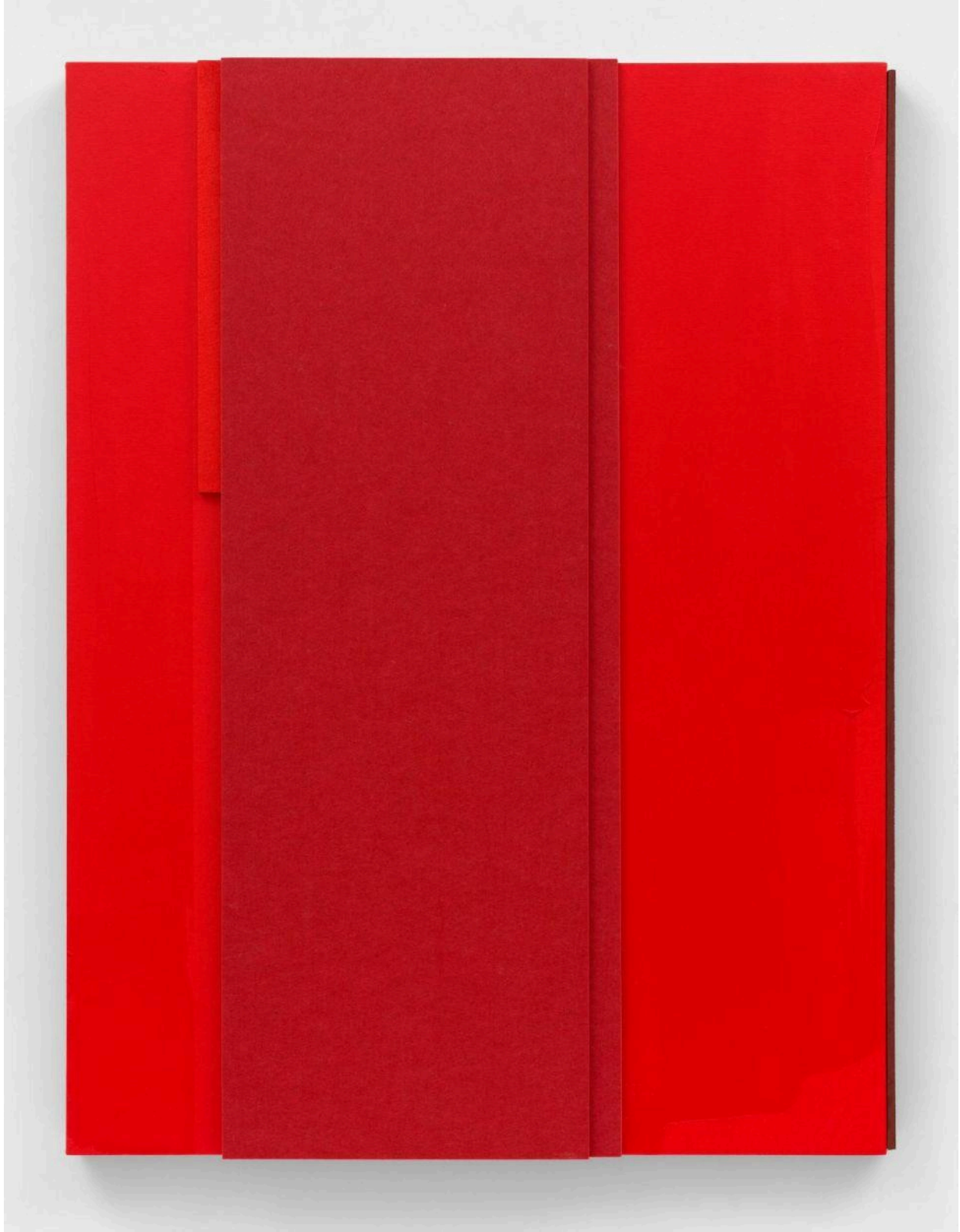
As in all of Hilton Als' curation, there is no mistaking that he's making statements about being Black and queer in today's world. Speaking with Observer about the exhibition, he refers to the bust in the show of James Baldwin by Rudolf Stingel. "Baldwin is the great unifying queer presence in the show—the sculpture, his quotes, etc. He has become a huge inspiration for a lot of gay people and people of all sorts, and I wanted him to kind of be our queer leader here, a person who was not 'out' in his personal life but who didn't hide it, either."



Ina Archer, *Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show*, 2024; 3-channel video installation, 17 minutes 30 seconds, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Microscope Gallery, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio

About Cy Twombly, an acknowledged master in 20th-century art, he notes that the artist's relationships and sexuality were explored through metaphor and never any 'out' statement. "Then we have Ronny Quevedo, an out gay man whose work is not only about cultural differences but also the beauty in high style. Again, this is not overtly gay work, but Ronny's brilliance, like Twombly's, is to never leave anything out without spelling out anything explicitly. The queer Goth magazines/images are the most explicit examples we have of queerness, and I like to look at those works because they are in contrast to the 'art' while being art, too. They are in vitrines because they are paper pieces—zines—and I wanted to protect them."

There is a formal photograph by [Irving Penn](#) in the exhibition showing Paul and [Jane Bowles](#) with [Oliver Smith](#), a set designer and Paul's cousin and collaborator. "Writers are writing, and now they're on the wall in the Penn picture. But art is 'silent'...most of it. To include the Bowles was to make a point of actual writers being in the show, along with words. Didion is the master of elision, of what is not said. Joyce didn't leave any space in his writing, so he's a nice contrast with Didion. Twombly, Martin and Oldenburg are a way to talk about 'modernism'—on the page and in art in general."



Jennie C. Jones, Fluid Red Tone (in the break), 2022; Architectural felt, acoustic panel, and acrylic on canvas, 48 × 36 ½ × 2 ¾ inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2025 Jennie C. Jones

Agnes Martin and Vija Celmins are two master painters of silence. [Brice Marden](#)'s letter drawing, Sarah Charlesworth's painting of a book with blank pages and Claes Oldenburg's notebook page in the form of a typewriter eraser. Silence is a language, and inside language are pauses, evasions and everything not said.

Als' brilliant essay, *The Poetics of Silence*, accompanies the exhibit. In it, he addresses the issue of connoisseurship and how the art world is largely one of taste, class and what is acceptable and considered important in the art world. He had to negotiate that culture when he studied art history at Columbia in the early 1980s. "Prior to my discovering that there existed serious academic scholarship concerned, fundamentally, with the relationship between historical experience, the artifacts produced and one's perceptions as a scholar in the present, I had no language to come to terms with the museum images that stared blindly."

He had to learn how to perceive, especially in what was then a world absent of Black queerness, devoid of that context. "I had yet to learn that a canvas, a photograph or a moving picture might have an emotional resonance aside from one's emotional history—that, in fact, an image might move one to a reaction because the form or color might project an emotional resonance by virtue of the manner in which it is done. To see, one must possess a language that directs the eyes to what is being perceived."



The language of perception is ephemeral. Yet in all of Hilton Als' work, his signature is indelible. He is a queer Black man who offers to the viewer, time and again, this important lens. He marks this expansive thrust in choosing the art for his exhibitions. "The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts" gives us the opportunity to broaden our perception and to embrace the space between what is current, past, taught, experienced and even what we thought we understood. Als' curation is that opportunity to perceive those in-between, often out-of-reach places that society hides behind. But you can also, as he said, "enjoy the show."

Vija Celmins, *Blackboard Tableau #8* (Edward), 2012; Acrylic, alkyd and pastel on found and made tablets and wood shelf, 10 ½ × 7⅝ inches each. © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery