

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in February



By Holland Cotter

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CHELSEA

The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts

Through March 29. Hill Art Foundation, 239 10th Avenue, Manhattan; 212-337-4455, hillartfoundation.org.



Ellen Gallagher “Deluxe,” 2004-2005, grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoints. Ellen Gallagher, via Gagosian; Photo by Alex Delfanne

The success of a personal-choice group exhibition like “The Writing’s on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts” at Hill Art Foundation naturally depends on the tastes and curatorial skills of the chooser. And with the writer Hilton Als in charge we’re in good hands. In a wall text, Als writes of his interest in art that suggests equivalencies with language, spoken or written, in terms of its expressive dynamics (loud, soft; dark, light), and its ability to suggest silence — that most radical of sonic conditions.

Some entries here refer to the literal production of language: A sculpture by Rachel Harrison incorporates a typewriter; one by Vija Celmins takes the form of a king-size rubber eraser. Others — a one-line printed text by Christopher Knowles, a vivaciously annotated drawing by Umar Rashid — make language itself a primary visual medium, with abstract drawings by Agnes Martin and Cy Twombly, as light and fleet as signatures, giving visual art the presence of a voice. Finally, spoken word does find a place, in Ina Archer’s three-channel video “Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show,” which surveys a history of minstrelsy as seen in vintage films.



Ina Archer, “BBMAMS: Minstrels (Painting/Collage),”
2024, acrylic paint and collage on paper. via Ina Archer and
Microscope Gallery, New York

And the show is punctuated with references to writers whose authorial voices the curator admires, James Baldwin chief among them. Als has organized memorable exhibitions around Baldwin before, considering him both a producer of words and as an often-

portrayed visual subject, with the two aspects united here in a 1955 first edition of “Notes of a Native Son,” with a grave-looking Baldwin gazing out from the dust jacket.

Baldwin’s presence is also enlisted in an image-word pairing that presses home the ominous implications of the first half of the exhibition title. Next to a 1962 Andy Warhol painting of a matchbox printed with the words “Close Cover Before Striking Match,” Als posts a quote from a Baldwin essay from the same year calling for antiracist revolution. “If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!” Judging by what we’re reading, and seeing, and hearing in the news, “next time” could be now.

See the January gallery shows [here](#).

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic and a senior writer for the Culture section of The Times, where he has been on staff since 1998. [More about Holland Cotter](#)