

How Do You Paint Language?

A group show curated by Hilton Als meditates on words in the visual arts, but wields silence in ways that verge on obstinate obscurity.



Lisa Yin Zhang 19 hours ago



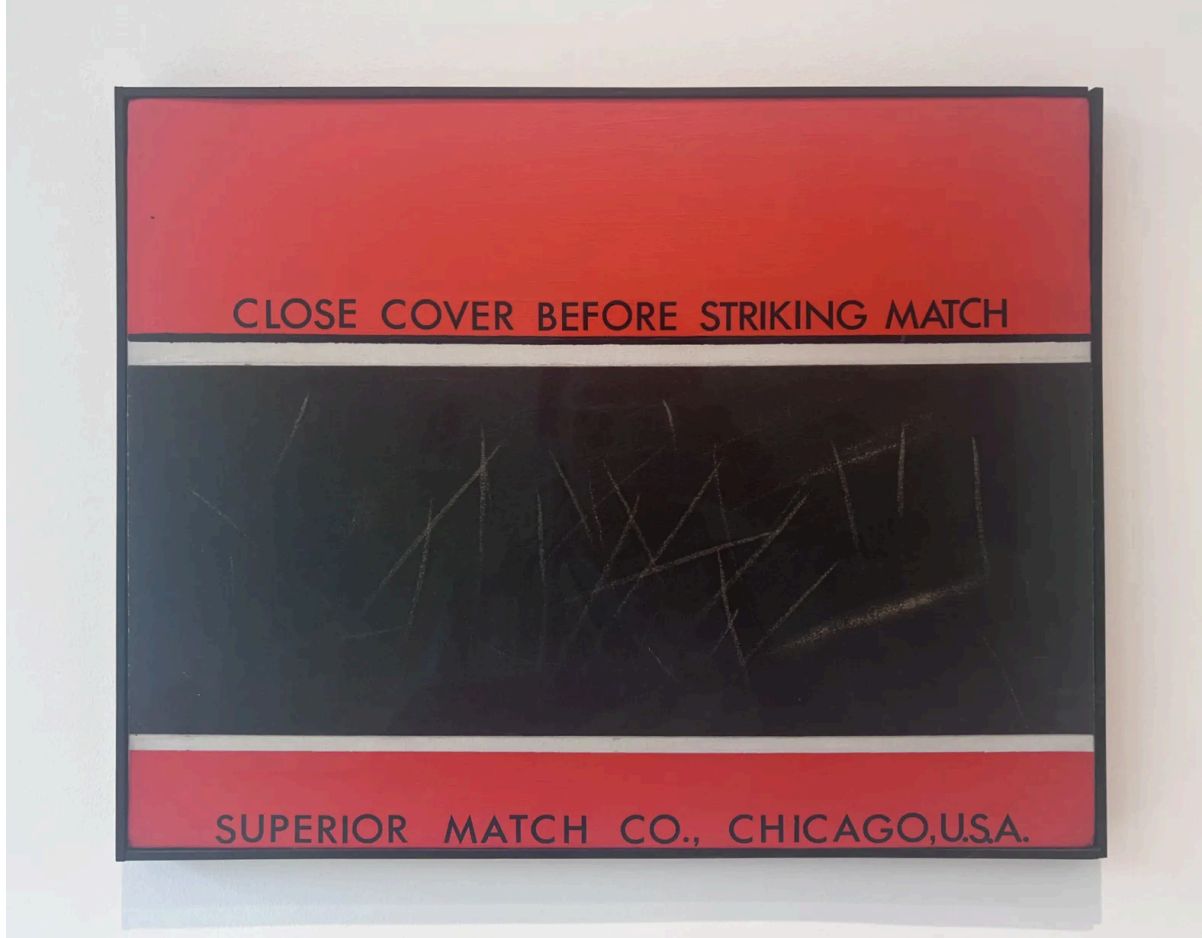
Judy Linn, "James Joyce on 23rd St." (c. 1970s), archival pigment print (all photos Lisa Yin Zhang/*Hyperallergic*)

Reviewing *The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in Visual Arts* feels like offering water to the ocean. Curated by Hilton Als, the exhibition mirrors the Pulitzer Prize-winning author's stripped yet thorny prose — see, for instance, statements like the deceptively simple “You know what being is. It happens to you all the time,” in his 2,000-plus-word essay

accompanying the show. The exhibition is relatively straightforward — though no less rich and evocative for it — asking and suggesting answers to the question: What is the relationship of language and silence to visual art? Occasionally, however, it drowns in a dense, vexed network of obscure associations that made me yearn for solid land.

The first, straightforward level of experience is defined by comprehensible works, as well as the wall texts, information contained in the Bloomberg Connects app via scannable QR codes, and Als's curatorial essay — in other words, everything that guides a viewer toward meaning without overdetermining it. This includes works that use words as the medium, such as Christopher Knowles's typewritten one-line experiment "Untitled (Dance)" (undated), in which "dance" repeats across the page in a kind of bodily rhythm that successively leeches the word of meaning, converting it to pure sound, as well as Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Poster/ Poem (Le Circus)" (1964), wherein words and symbols move freely across the page in various colors and fonts — for example, "hoop" within a circle.

Some of the most successful pieces reinforce the idea that we move through a flood of language and its fragments in the form of advertising, signage, and information (and though not explicitly mentioned, digital media and scrolling). Andy Warhol's acrylic and collage on linen work "Close Cover Before Striking" (1962), depicting a matchbook cover with the titular words, along with etched scratches on the charcoal-gray striking surface, for instance, suggests a form of conversation between the manufacturer's printed directions and the consumer's mark-making. A pair of untitled 2008 paper works by David Salle incorporates fragments of what look to be advertisements, recalling the found poetry that appears in peeling layers of pasted-over subway ads.



Andy Warhol, "Close Cover Before Striking" (1962), acrylic and collage on linen

Ellen Gallagher also appropriates ads in "DeLuxe" (2004–5), in which she reworks those culled from magazines targeting Black audiences by adding watercolor, plasticine, toy eyeballs, and more. They reminded me of doodle on public ads and infrastructure (e.g., goatees, blacked-out eyes, graffiti tags), another form of expression and conversation. And Ronny Quevedo draws upon overlooked forms of communication in "body and soul (Reflection Eternal)" (2022), incorporating a dress pattern of layered directions and arrows, and "puntero" (2018), a piece that inscribes the physical movements of sport from a goal toward the center of the field.

Equally integral to the exhibition, as suggested by its subtitle, is silence. Works related to the theme range from the cutesy, such as Vija Celmin's "Pink Pearl Eraser" (1966–67), a large-scale reproduction of the eraser (though she's capable of inducing a deep form of quiet), to those that hush the mind, as in two works by the queen of silence, Agnes Martin. "Untitled #20" (1988) evokes a lined page or a music staff absent its notes, but possesses a formal completeness that forestalls the dread of trying to fill it. "Untitled 20" and an architectural relief panel by Jennie C. Jones, "Fluid Red Tone (in the break)" (2022), most successfully achieve one of the exhibition's stated aims — "show[ing] what silence looks like."

Among the stars of this show is Ina Archer's "Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show" (2024), a nearly 20-minute video installation that combines and manipulates a century's worth of clips from films and TV broadcasts, notably including the iconic debate between James Baldwin and

William F. Buckley at the Cambridge Union in 1965. In its dizzying pastiche of references severed from context, the artist creates an overload that results in the kind of silence Als defines as a state where “everything and nothing speaks to you.” This silence relates to Édouard Glissant’s theory of the marginalized subject’s **right to opacity** — the political position of refusal. As Adrienne Rich warns us in one of many quotes on the wall: “Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence.”

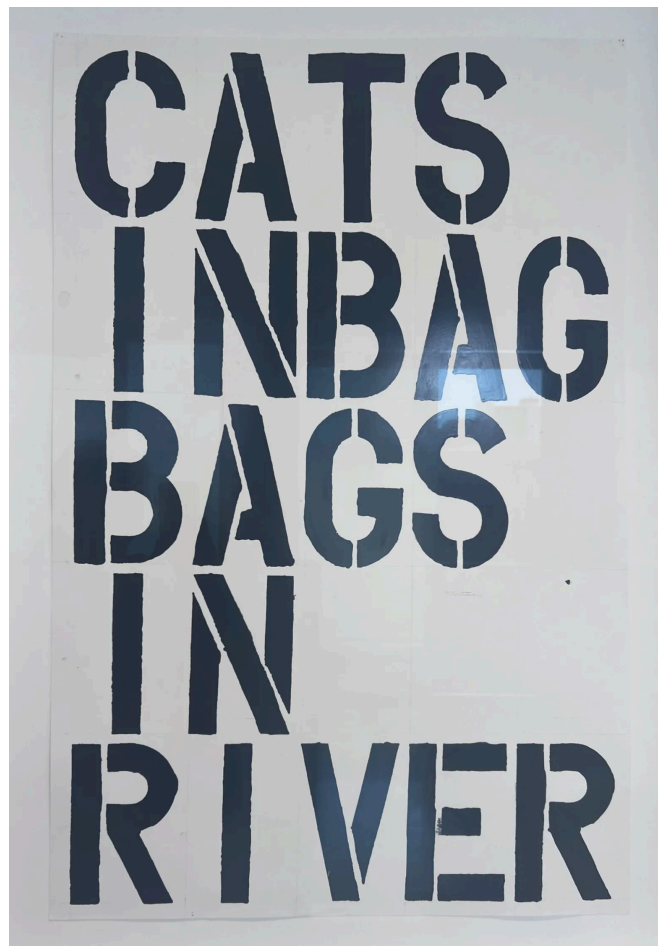


Jennie C. Jones, “Fluid Red Tone (in the break)” (2022), architectural felt, acoustic panel, and acrylic on canvas

But *The Writing’s On the Wall* also wields silence in ways that verge on obstinate obscurity. Meaning glimmers winkingly on the horizon of one room, which sets a 19th-century male guardian figure made by an unrecorded **Betsi-Nzaman** artist upon a Modernist desk, invoking the gaping voids of history — the Euro-American art world makes much of 20th-century Modernism, but not enough of the corpus of West and Central African sculpture that inspired it. Pasted on the window behind the pairing is a photograph of a photograph of a man in an eyepatch and bowtie pasted on a window, its title suggesting that it was possibly taken just a block down from the Hill Art Foundation. But a nearby quote by James Joyce is the only indication other than the checklist that that depicted figure might be the writer. Beyond that, one would need to arrive equipped with knowledge that he was a Modernist to make the connection that all the works here relate to the historiography of the movement. To fully put together the relationship between all that and silence, a more apt quote might have come from **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** (1916): “I

will try to express myself ... using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use — silence, exile, and cunning.”

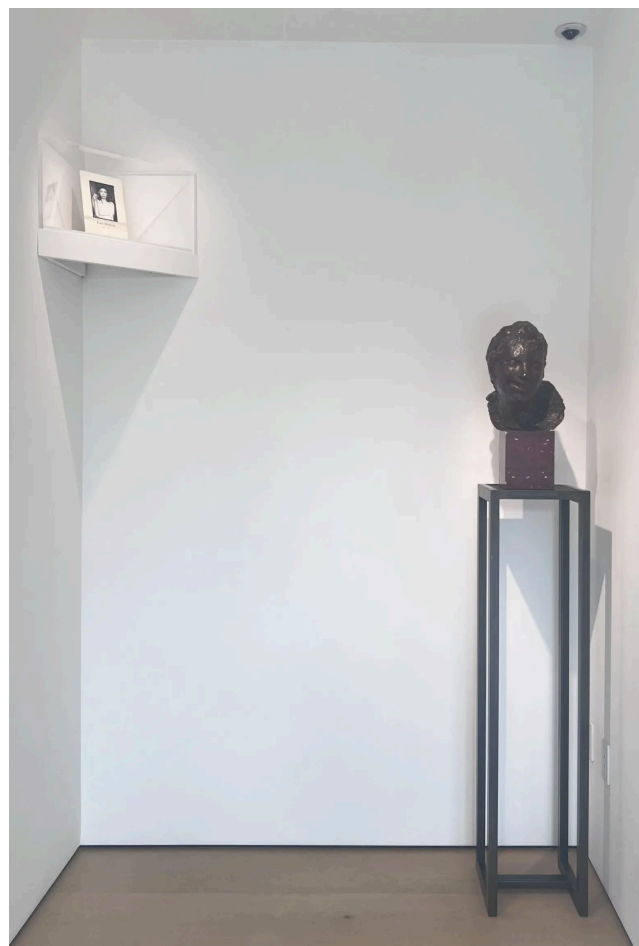
The exhibition all but loses me entirely in the nook across from this installation, which pairs a photo of Joan Didion holding a cigarette with “Rieuse,” an 1890 sculpture by Medardo Rosso portraying a laughing woman. Beside that is a quote by Didion on Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) about the “vast emptiness at the center of the Western experience... a dread so close to zero that human voices fadeout [*sic*]...” Silence as a form of exhaustion, of defeat? Or maybe we’re supposed to laugh in the face of nihilism, like Rosso’s bust? That photo of Didion is placed high up in the corner, mirroring Kazimir Malevich’s intentional installation of his “Black Square” (1913) in a high corner, a typical position of Russian religious icons — is it punning on her status as a literary icon? Is it just me who has no idea what’s going on here? Silence as “everything and nothing speak[ing]” to me, indeed. Is that the point? If so, what’s the point? Fittingly enough, my restless ruminations on this one vexingly inscrutable installation might be best summed up by another work in this generally evocative and compelling show. Stenciled in bright blue letters in Christopher Wool’s “Untitled” (1990) are the words: “Cat’s in bag; bag’s in river” — there seems to be some kind of secret to unlocking the meaning here, but it’s lost on me.



Christopher Wool, “Untitled” (1992), enamel and graphite on paper



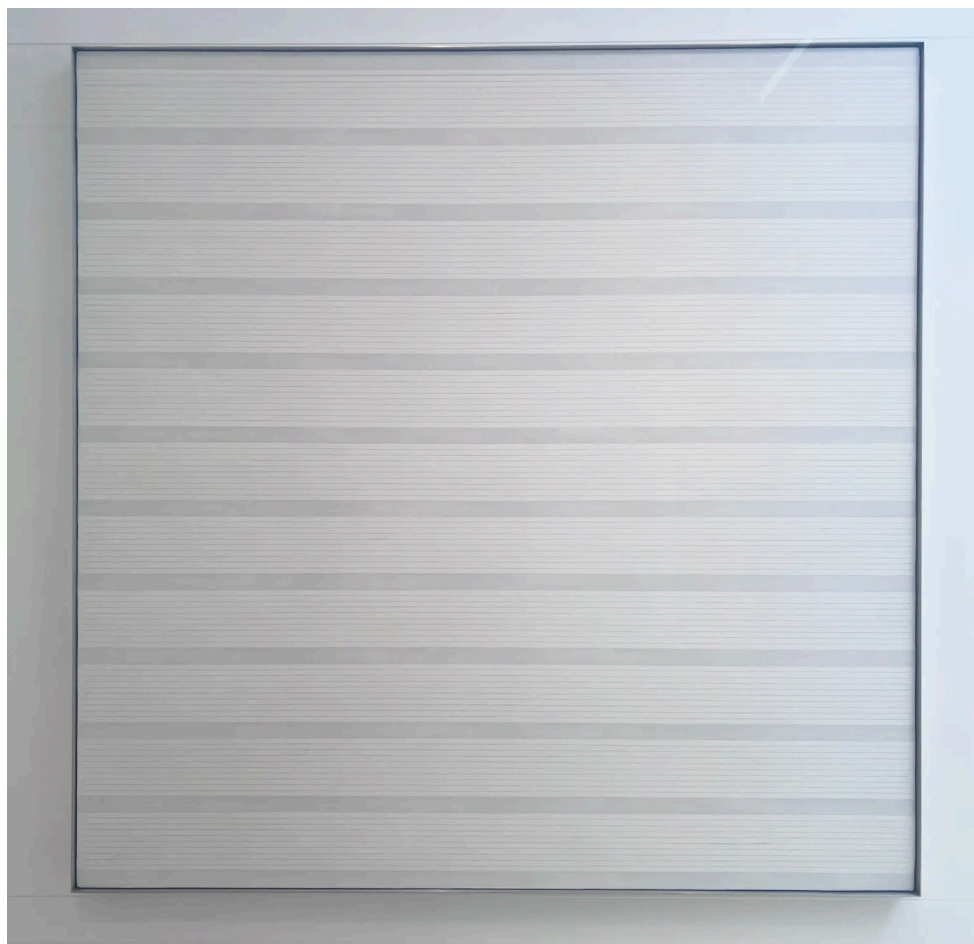
Installation view of *The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts*



Installation view of *The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts*



Christopher Knowles, "Untitled (Dance)" (undated), typing on paper



Agnes Martin, "Untitled #20" (1998), acrylic and pencil on canvas



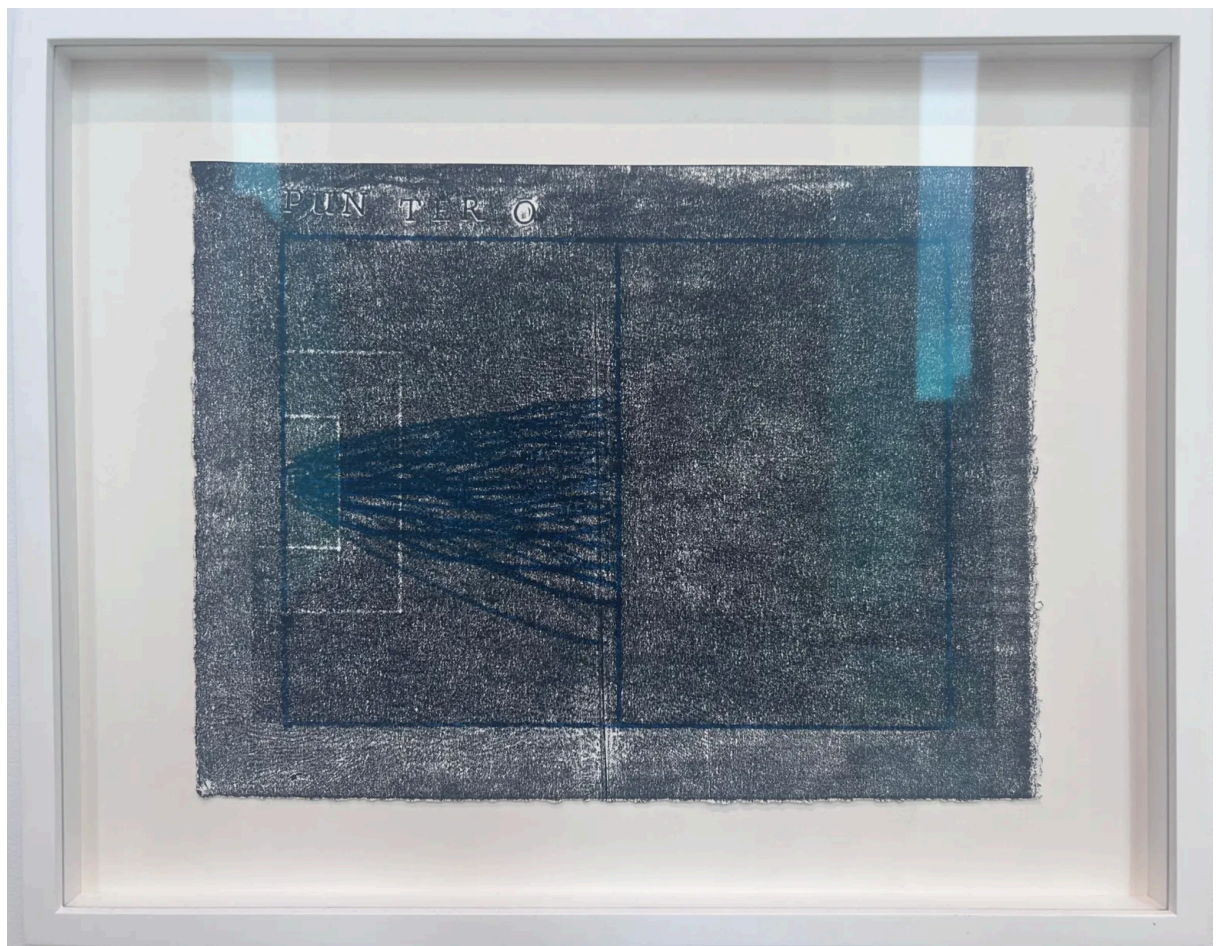
Vija Celmins, "Pink Pearl Eraser" (1966–67), acrylic on balsa wood



Detail of Ellen Gallagher, "DeLuxe" (2004–5), 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



David Salle, "Untitled" (2008), oil on lithograph on paper



Ronny Quevedo, "puntero" (2018), wax on paper

The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts *continues at the Hill Art Foundation (239 10th Avenue 3rd floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 29. The exhibition was curated by Hilton Als.*

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