

In Other Words: At Alexander Gray, Kay Rosen Hopes for Justice During a Turbulent Political Moment

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Through April 7 in New York



Kay Rosen, *White House v. America*, 2018, paint on wall.

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“In the past, I have gone where the language has led me, but in these times, out of priorities, anger, and urgency, I have made artworks whose texts pertain in some way only to the current political situation,” Kay Rosen has said. Indeed, each of the 12 pieces in “Stirring Words,” her new exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates gallery in New York, refer, via clever wordplay, to the immediacy and intensity of politics in America—they call attention to social and environmental injustices, from wealth inequality to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. But while the show is, at times, confrontational, it isn’t all gloom and doom. In the end, Rosen has created an exhibition about the resilience of individual communities and the country as a whole.

For four decades, Rosen’s chosen medium has been painting, but she has also proven herself an adept sculptor of language. Wordplay and dark wit have been central to her artistic practice, and she has often given her typographic creations political weight—Reagan-era policies and the George W. Bush administration have informed some of her past projects.

The role of language in the political arena has changed recently, especially thanks to a president who is known to tweet in incomplete sentences and exclamations, and Rosen’s work has evolved in response. She seems to be focusing on problems caused or exacerbated by Trump’s policies and temperament. Many of the show’s paintings—simple and clean in form, macro and complicated in their politics—are, at first glance, easy to consume, simply colorful words that unfold across canvases.

White House vs. America (2018), a monumental wall painting, is the show's centerpiece. At 35 feet wide, it sets a hostile tone for the exhibition—"WH v AM" in bright red sans-serif lettering. Though its title makes clear the pun Rosen had in mind, it could also be read as *wham*, the sound resulting from a forceful or even explosive collision.



Other pieces are more explicitly oriented around pressing political issues. *IOU* (2017) and *Ever Never Land* (2017) refer to legacies of colonialism and its seemingly indelible presence today. *IOU*, one of the smallest pieces here, delineates the letters "IOU" within the word "SIOUX." An obvious nod to hollow promises made to Indigenous peoples following seizure and contamination of their land, the work utilizes earth tones for both the "IOU" and the bookending "S" and "X." The text is positioned boldly against a stark white background.

Other works in the show exude a sense of optimism. *Triumph Over Trump (Blue Over Yellow)*, 2017, crafts a hopeful message by way of layering colors and words; the product is a literal iteration of the title. Rosen painted "Trump" in yellow and then coated those same letters with blue paint, adding an "I" in the middle and an "H" at the end. The result is an uplifting play of color and syntax.

Notably, all of Rosen's work appears in all caps, and that means that, for today's viewers, her art can't help but recall Donald Trump's Twitter, where phrases like "FAKE NEWS," "DEPLORABLES," and "SAD!" proliferate. The president's brand of cognitive dissonance serves to bolster and preserve violent systems. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, there are Rosen's paintings, which put bold statements toward more peaceable ends. Trump obscures the truth, while Rosen uses the process of obscuration to embed truths within her pieces. In thinking about Rosen's work as the opposite of Trump's weaponization of language, we can, perhaps, reinvigorate ourselves and find novelty in the artist's tried and true form.



TRIUMPH

Kay Rosen, *Triumph Over Trump (Blue Over Yellow)*, 2017, acryla gouache on watercolor paper.
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