

ARTFORUM

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KAY ROSEN

GRAY KAPERNEKAS GALLERY

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that the “test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” Kay Rosen’s text-based art requires precisely this kind of doublethink, as almost all of the sly arrangements of words she has been making for the last twenty-five years reward concerted attention by revealing double and triple entendres. The “Aha!” moments often pack an emotional or political punch, but are always leavened by the artist’s sense of humor.

Trained as a linguist, Rosen has become a kind of visual rhetorician, manipulating words—via juxtaposition, scale, and color—in order to highlight their inherent fluidity and its complex implications. This exhibition, which featured one large wall painting and a selection of recent small-scale drawings and paintings, inaugurated Gray Kapernekas Gallery’s program and was the artist’s first New York solo exhibition in three years.

The mental gymnastics required to decode the wall painting, which dates from 2004 and covered a full wall of the small gallery, are perhaps the most strenuous of all those demanded by this show. Here, a seemingly random collection of Rosen’s favored blocky, sans-serif letters—P N U U M L D E—appear in alternating shades of charcoal and slate gray and in varying sizes (the smaller middle letters forming a valley between two outer peaks). Swing your eyes back and forth, though, reading from the outside in, and you eventually arrive at the painting’s title: *Pendulum*.



P N U U M L D E

Kay Rosen, *Pendulum*, 2004, latex paint, dimensions variable.

Formally, *Pendulum* echoes *Big Talk*, 1985, an early billboard exhibited in Chicago whose two words—JUMBO MUMBO—were stacked one atop the other and could be read from left to right or, as suggested by the alternating color scheme, by moving one’s eyes up and down from word to word. This back-and-forth motion is an apt metaphor for the state of heightened awareness one achieves when attempting to reconcile the “opposed ideas” in any of Rosen’s works. It also relates to the political implications that can be found in both pieces: The early billboard references the city’s bloviating politicians, who apocryphally earned Chicago the epithet the “Windy City,” and the later painting (given the artist’s known sensitivity to such matters), the metronomic swing from Bush to Clinton to Bush.

Recently, University of Michigan professors created US maps that prove most of the country is politically neither red nor blue but rather violet, countering reductive notions of our electoral affinities. Rosen’s *Blurred*, 2004, is a perfect distillation of this condition: The letters BLU are drawn in blue colored pencil and RED in red; in the middle, there is a lone purple R. To her credit, Rosen uses language to show rather than tell, and *Blurred* expresses not generalization but oft-overlooked specificity.

The other works in the exhibition offer smaller, more personal epiphanies. In *Bluish*, 2002, a cerulean I stands surrounded by rosy letters spelling BLUSH, while in *Your Eyes Say Yes*, 2004, the initial E in the word EYES is rendered in a lighter shade than its neighbors. Rosen sidesteps accusations of creating one-liners by treating language visually, supplementing its normal task of signification to reveal, through the smallest of interventions, an infinitely varied and playful world.

—Brian Sholis