

Kay Rosen

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In a career going back to the late 1970s, Kay Rosen has made a medium out of language the way, say, Rachel Lachowicz has made a medium out of lipstick: Words are for her a found material with embedded meanings she can mine and play on, not just changing their context (the basic Duchampian maneuver) but boldly if slyly reshaping them. She has a keen ear—and, importantly, an eye—for puns and homonyms, rhymes and resemblances: a writer's business. But she works on the wall and on canvas and paper, phrasing her essays as installations, paintings, and drawings, and she has the visual artist's absorption in form and scale. Color, too, is integral to her work; in fact, the spooner- and malaprop-like constructions in which she delights are often dependent on it, or on adjusted letter placements that no typesetter would allow.

Rosen's works often touch on politics, at least implicitly. To point out that "silence" and "license" are anagrams, for example, might seem slight, a news flash for crossword lovers, but in Rosen's treatment the words spun out in the mind. And in her recent show she directly addressed an American social disaster, Hurricane Katrina. In the mural *New Orleans 2005, 2006*, the dismayed expression OH NO



View of "Kay Rosen:
Wall Paintings and
Drawings 2002–2006."
From left: *Back of
the Boat*, 2006, *New
Orleans 2005, 2006*.

had AH added to its tail, making it OH NOAH, invoking the biblical deluge. OH and AH also resonated as cries of distress, and NO, of course, was not just the word *no* but the initials of the flooded city. Adverb and noun, word and syllable, personal and place name—each fragment here changed state like Wittgenstein's rabbit/duck, with a polymorphous and simultaneous mutability.

Fully filling one wall, this mural informed readings of two works installed in the same room. In a small work on canvas matched with *New Orleans 2005* by a shared color scheme, the word RAFT sits on a yellow ground, the first letter pink, the last three jumping out in a darker cherry. This "raft" dragging an "aft" is neatly described by the painting's title, *Back of the Boat*, 2006, which equally neatly insinuates one lesson of Katrina: that the task Rosa Parks undertook in an Alabama bus in 1955 remains unfinished. A second large mural, *I Wish I Knew My Neighbor Better*, 2005, paired two versions of the name of a neighbor of Rosen's, Ivory L. Brown. The names differed only in the initial L., shown once in lavender or lilac, once in, let's call it lime green; since "Ivory" and "Brown" were painted in the colors the words designate, these other shades, one assumed, were variant guesses at a color to complement a middle name that Rosen isn't close enough to her neighbor to know. That one-letter shift, then, a cipher interceding between differences, became a sign for ignorance of and distance from one's community—a distance that gained weight in the context of Katrina, and of the reference to race introduced by the two main colors.

The exhibition also contained a strong set of works on paper, a unified group arranged as an abecedarium—a virtuoso display of Rosen's patented style. But the first three pieces together constituted an integrated, intricate installation and stole the show. As I looked at them, Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, came to mind as another attempt to face a city's ruin, and by its emotional extremity threw light on Rosen's approach: cool, witty, oblique, dry, minimal. Clever concision is not our usual way of dealing with social trauma, but given time and thought, the upset, anger, and sadness in these works came through.

—David Frankel