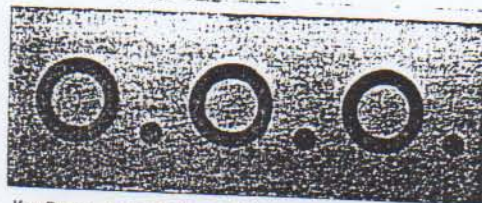


Kay Rosen manipulates the most rudimentary elements of the linguistic lexicon in an extended machination that continually displays the complex mutability of language. A particularly elegant example of her confluences of concrete poetry with minimalist painting, in her show at Insam Gleicher (February 15–March 30), was a small, silver canvas supporting three empty black circles interspersed with three smaller circles of solid black. The elemental perfection of the circles suggested a timeless cyclical order, and their geometrically exact roundness carried a pure self-referentiality usually relegated to the most potent symbol, or to the best minimalist sculpture. The repeated shapes seemed interchangeable within the linear composition, their sameness capable of infinite non-hierarchical permutation with absolutely no change of meaning. This endless harmonious progression, however, became the definitive site of chaos when its title thrust a linguistic meaning onto its formal coherence. The large circles became capital O's and the little black dots merely periods, and the picture became an acronym for *Out of Order*.

In an *Untitled Grid* of 12 paintings on paper, Rosen fused, truncated, abutted, and did general violence to normal words, effectively presenting their constituent letters out of normal order. Her simple presentations of single words and phrases demonstrate how crucial the context is, both visual and linguistic, to the fabrication of meaning. In come run-ons, she melded words together, literally fixing the context within the new word: e.g., FELTIPEN, GREYELLO. This fixing doesn't necessarily stifle the possibilities of meaning, but rather expands them, so that the run-on DAREDEVIL could mean dared evil as well as daredevil. Rosen also disrupted the strictures of context by excluding clues to specific meaning, so that other meanings may flourish. What at first seemed to be mundane slices of the alphabet can evoke resonant complex experience, as when RSTUVW is jump-started to become "a rusty volkswagen" and LMNO is romanticized as "the middle of a fi[lm no]ir." In several palindromes, Rosen uses the simple mirroring and repetition of formal properties of letters to merge the expectation of meaning in language with the similar desire for significance in visual form. In A REDDER A, VIOLETTA, and GREYER, the comparison evoked by the reading is frustrated by the perceptual equivalence of the uniformly colored letters. The power of formal presentation, and the history of the exercise of this power, is neatly underscored by Rosen in

ANTITITIAN, painted in black on the luscious red color associated with the great painter, and neatly undermined, as the historically validated authority of the use of a color is reduced to stuttering nonsense: "an - tititi - an." In her signature nonplussed humor that continually subverts the claims, by painting and language, to represent faithfully, Rosen does offer one example of these systems' success: a green "genre" painting is, of course, a painting of the word *GENRE* in a satisfying normal green.

In a site-specific piece entitled *The pen is mightier . . .*, Rosen's interest in the structure of paintings and words was expanded to include the structured experience of gallery viewing, as well as other cultural phenomena. A large column in the center of the gallery blocked easy inspection of the two components of the piece. An advertising photo for the recent movie version of *Hamlet* was an intense Mel Gibson staring across the room—his vision blocked by a regal sword wielded in front of one eye—at a text from the play painted on the wall: WHAT DO YOU READ, MY LORD? WORDS, WORDS, WORDS. Rosen painted obliterating black squares in front of the words: WORDS, so that they ambiguously became SWORDS, SWORDS, SWORDS. The blockage—of the column, the sword, and the squares—confounded any clearly coherent perception of all the components involved and confused any fixed interpretation of the piece. In referring to the popular update of the Shakespearean "masterpiece," and then messing with its authoritative text herself, Rosen suggests that languages are continually re-created by every social or personal use, and therefore are continually mutated according to the changing context. Though a given structure—a text, an architectural detail, or an object formalized into a metaphor—may physically limit or obscure expression, the obstruction may in turn cause more furtive investigation and spur greater imagination in an effort to create potential meanings. In the calm violence dealt the language, Rosen resuscitates its ambiguity of presence that simultaneously delimits and defines human experience.



Kay Rosen, *Out of Order*, 1991, Sign paint on canvas, from a series of 3 canvases, 7 1/4" x 20 1/4". Courtesy Insam Gleicher Gallery.