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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Art review: Joe Amrhein at Another Year in L.A.

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It's easy to poke fun at the jargon that clogs the channels of art criticism. Phrases like "a nihilistic tease" and "pre-postmodernist cool" invite snickers. It's harder to do what Joe Amrhein does, to play into and feed off of that insular artspeak at the same time, to be wry and not just disgruntled, to construct something delectable from the intellectual debris.

Amrhein worked as a sign painter in the '70s and '80s, and has retained that trade's emphasis on bold clarity to gently mock the obfuscatory tendencies of art writing, and the limitations of verbal communication in general. In the mostly new works in his thoroughly enjoyable show at Another Year in L.A., he paints in vivid enamel on translucent Mylar one letter, word or phrase per strip, then layers or interweaves the strips in various configurations. Some pieces, like "Kitsch," are quite legible, a drumbeat progression of words read from top to bottom, back to front: "Little More Than Testosterone-Driven Post-Adolescent Derivative Kitsch." In other works, illegibility is part of the point and the visual humor. Among the dozens of descriptive phrases in German and English in "Detailfülle" is "Freudian," hiding in plain sight behind the others in large gold-leaf letters, not far from "Lucidity," similarly obscured.

Droll, early text paintings by John Baldessari come to mind, as do the language works of Lawrence Weiner and Jack Pierson, as well as the clever verbal subversions of Tauba Auerbach. Amrhein's lettering is crisp and vivid, and by using fonts familiar from signs touting special promotions and declarations of quality, he infuses the work with a vaguely upbeat positivity. The alphabet is a visual wonderland, as these pieces attest, and the building blocks of a spectacular and doomed tower of babble.

-- Leah Ollman

Another Year in L.A., Pacific Design Center, Suite B267, 8687 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (323) 223-4000, through July 29. www.anotheryearinla.com/

Image: Joe Amrhein, "Kitsch," from Another Year in L.A.