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Joe Amrhein

'Critical Mass'

Roebling Hall

390 Wythe Avenue, at South Fourth Street

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Through April 10

Joe Amrhein is best known as the founder and guiding spirit of Pierogi 2000, a Williamsburg gallery whose legendary drawing files have brought the work of hundreds of artists to wider attention. But he is also an artist with strong Conceptual leanings and a sign painter's skills. His medium is language embodied in big, gaudy, circusy letters on vellum.

The subject of this accurately titled show, his second in New York, is art criticism, choice phrases of which are writ large on individual bands of vellum. Arranged in staggered layers, these words form handsome visual cascades of meaning that hover, somewhat appropriately, just beyond easy comprehension. Mr. Amrhein's choices have a pungent, free-floating generality. They are, as the show's first work dubiously announces, "Too Abstract to Actually Refer to a Particular Source." (Picture that coming out of an editor's mouth, and feel an art critic's pain.)

These works pay homage while exacting an exuberant revenge. They suggest how the difficulties of describing art can be aided and disguised by the infinite poetic possibilities of language. In some instances shorter phrases pile one upon another to form pleasant cacophonies of aesthetic conditions: "oscillating ambiguity," "seemingly fully formed vision," "mutant Cubist construction." In other instances longer, stand-alone whoppers expose certain, shall we say, *hyphen* issues: as in "late-modern hardware-and-dimestore-totem whimsy with a whiff of allegory" or "a mind-bobbling, anti-idealist sublime-in-reverse."

Mr. Amrhein also projects his phrases in shadow form in a piece using glass shelves; and in two other works he paints them on layers of glass in arrangements reminiscent of early 1970's Process Art. (One is smashed, à la Barry Le Va.) These last are less successful, in part because they are much harder to read, which eliminates half the fun.

ROBERTA SMITH