

# Thesaurus Paintings

By Teddy Larsy – Spring 2015





*Talk is Cheap*, 2014  
oil on canvas, 28" x 32".

# *Thesaurus Paintings*

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MEL BOCHNER

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start making text-based art?

BOCHNER

One reason I focus on ordinary language is because everybody can read it and have some personal reference point. I imagine that people in the literary world see the work differently from people in the art world, but really, anybody can see it any way they want.

To me, the emotional trajectory of the painting is how one gets from the first word to the last word—from the prim and proper to the crude and vulgar. I concentrate a lot on the sense and sound of the language. The flow of words has to have a certain kind of rhythm—or a certain kind of lack of rhythm. That's how the narrative of the painting is constructed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read your pieces aloud as you work?

BOCHNER

I do read them aloud. But I assume that most people will read them with their own silent inner voice. I'll never know the kind of inflection that anyone else brings to their reading of my work. In another sense, the "voice" of the paintings themselves changes depending on the context in which they're seen. In my studio, they would seem to represent my voice, but if you see them on the wall of a gallery or museum, or in the pages of *The Paris Review*, the question becomes, Who's speaking? And there's no way to define who the speaker is. So it's language estranged—speech divorced from any speaker.

INTERVIEWER

How do you choose the first word in a thesaurus piece, and how do the other words come into being?

BOCHNER

I don't always know where the first word comes from. It might come from my reading or seeing something on TV or something one of my kids says or something that just pops into my head. But once it hooks into my brain, I begin to explore the synonyms in a thesaurus. I start by making lists in a notebook, then letting the words tell me—by arranging and rearranging them—what they want to say. From countless lists, a painting emerges. Somebody asked me once, What's the difference between this and poetry? I think there's an enormous difference, both in terms of opticality and physicality. The type of letter that I'm using—I think of myself as a painter of letters—the way they're painted, carefully or loosely, the way the color interacts with the ground, the way the paint handling itself becomes a language—all these factors transform the text in unpredictable ways. So the logic of the text is set against the viewing of the painting, creating a friction between the eye and the mind, seeing and reading.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever try to blur the line between seeing and reading, between a painting and a poem?

BOCHNER

I can see how people might read these paintings as a kind of poetry, but

what's at stake for me is finding new ways to engage viewers in the act of looking. Because, above all else, I consider these abstract paintings.

INTERVIEWER

So you've never had writer's block?

BOCHNER

Not really. I'm not even sure what writer's block is. Using words and having this vast treasure house of language to play around in—there is always some way to get back into my work, some avenue to explore what I'm feeling or thinking.

INTERVIEWER

Does a viewer need to know the evolution of your work in order to understand these thesaurus paintings?

BOCHNER

I don't think it's necessary. There is a great deal of my work that's still unknown, that's rarely, if ever, been shown. So it really isn't possible for anyone, including me, to understand it in its entirety. If and when it does become known, both the continuities and the discontinuities will become self-evident. So if someone is only interested in what I am doing now, that's okay, and if they are only interested in what I did forty years ago, that's okay, too.

INTERVIEWER

How did the "Blah" paintings come about?

BOCHNER

I actually had the idea of trying to deal with the sublinguistic a long time ago. But given the way I was working then, on the "Measurement" paintings for instance, I couldn't figure out how to do it. It was only after I started using language again that I picked up a canvas one day and wrote all over it, "blah blah blah blah blah." Since then, it's just sort of taken off on its own.

—*Interviewed by Teddy Lasry*