



## Mel Bochner, If The Colour Changes, Whitechapel Gallery, London

Zoe Pilger @ZoePilger Tuesday 6 November 2012 11:18

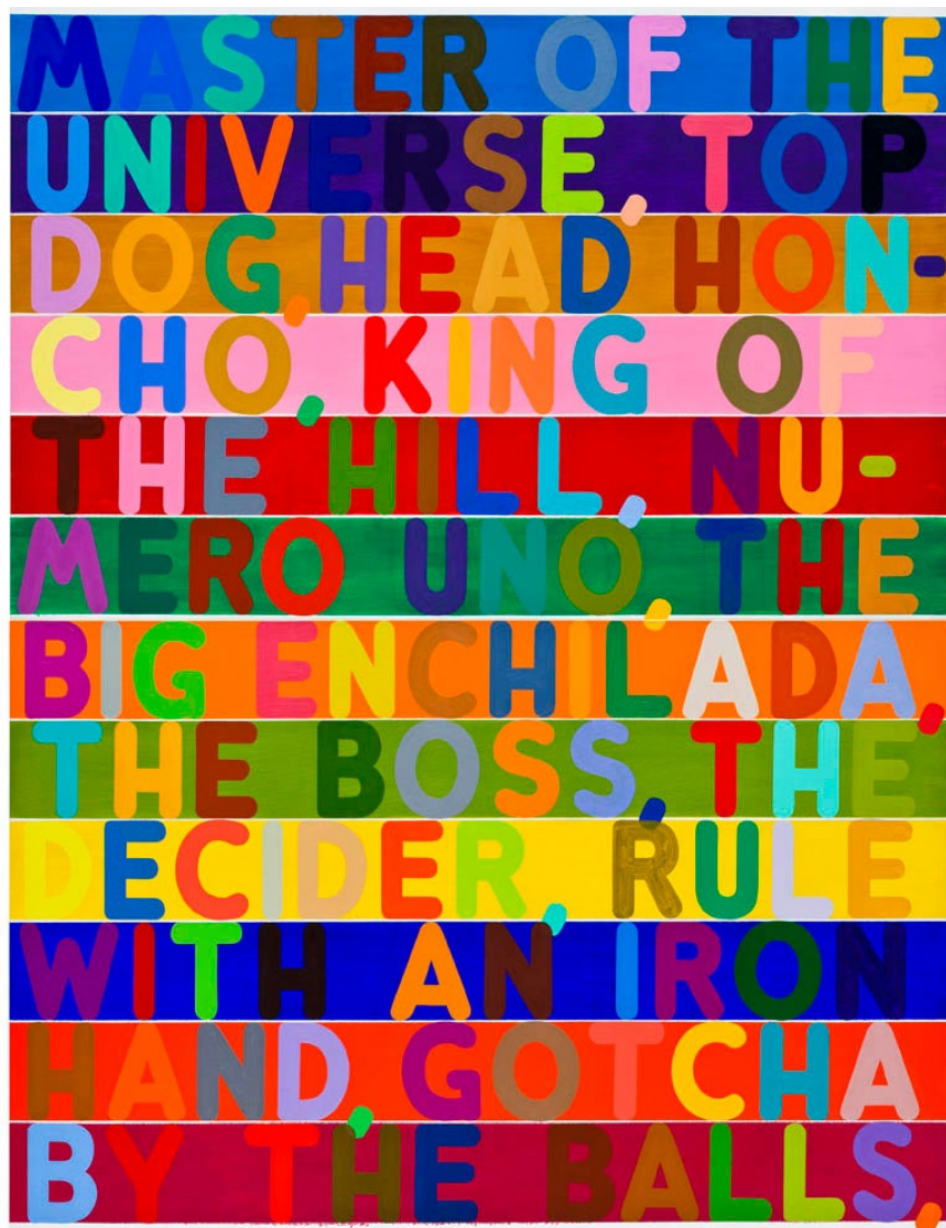


New York artist Mel Bochner stands in front of his painting 'Master of the Universe (2010)' at the Whitechapel Gallery

A photograph of Matisse working in his studio as an elderly man inspired the young American conceptual artist Mel Bochner to create *Theory of Painting* (1970). It was not the woman that Matisse was painting on the canvas that caught Bochner's attention, however, but the newspapers spread under his feet.

This simple detail would fuel Bochner's own very intellectual approach to painting, at a time when the latter had been daunted by, in his own words, "the humanistic stammering of Abstract Expressionism[..]." Painting in 1960s America existed in the shadow of Jackson Pollock and co.

Mel Bochner Blah, Blah, Blah, 2011  
Oil on velvet (10 panels) Overall:  
284.5 x 533.4 cm Courtesy Two  
Palms, New York



Mel Bochner Master of the Universe,  
2010 Oil and acrylic on canvas (2  
panels) Overall: 254 x 190.5 cm  
Collection Anita & Burton Reiner,  
Washington DC



But while Pollock had taken the revolutionary step of painting the canvas on the floor, thus rendering it horizontal rather than propped on an easel, down to earth and dirty rather than refined, he had always eventually hung it on the wall. Born a generation later, in 1940, Bochner had the bright idea of not merely making the work on the floor, but keeping it there. Instead of canvas, he used newspapers.

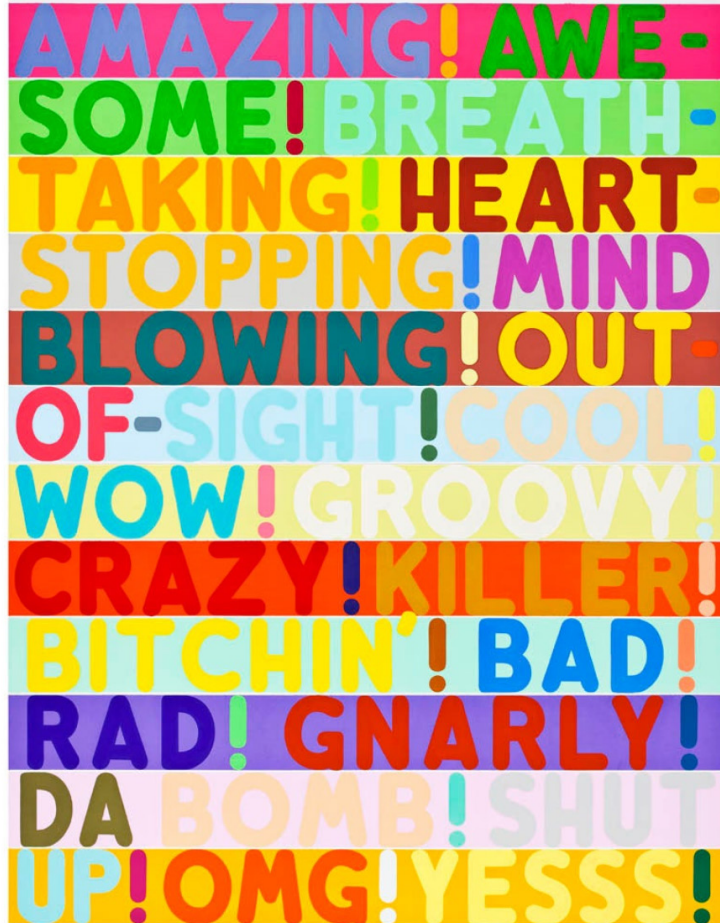
These twists and turns of art history inform the first UK retrospective of Bochner's 45 year career. The spats of artistic generations may seem absurd to the viewer, but the visual impression of many of these works remains fresh and exciting. The gallery text is helpful; it saves them from seeming like crass, colourful relics of a time of Happenings and oblique theory.

Here are the newspapers scattered and organized according to different formulae, overlaid with bright blue spray-paint, cordoned off from the public. *Theory of Painting* is remade every time it is shown, using newspapers bought on the day of installation. The myriad futilities of the British press are redeemed by Bochner's clever and vital arrangements.

Bochner has been cited as a vanguard figure of Conceptual Art, a movement which stressed the idea before the work. His photographic experiments, Wittgenstein quotes, and references to Pythagoras' theorem are balanced - mercifully - by the brilliance of his colour.

*Blah, Blah, Blah* (2011) is a huge painting that repeats the word again and again on a background of velvet. Humorous or annoying, it is the application of paint – the wet, dense blacks next to pale blues that are almost pure – which elevates the piece.

*Two Planar Arcs* (1977) is extraordinary; red, yellow, and green shapes are painted straight onto the white wall of the gallery, dripping and ruining the space – in a good way.



Mel Bochner *Amazing!*, 2011 Oil and acrylic on canvas (2 panels) Overall: 254 x 190.5 cm Midwest Private Collection