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## THE “URGE” IN SURGE

Kay Rosen and Shannon Ebner want to have a word with you

by Matt Keegan

At the end of last year, the Bush administration proposed an increase in troop levels in Iraq, strategically using the word “surge” and then deploying it onto the public. By choosing a word that sounded energized and proactive, the administration hoped to downplay an already dire situation. Shortly thereafter, presidential hopefuls John Edwards and Barack Obama countered with the term “escalation,” invoking the language (and history) of the Vietnam War. The linguistic battles of the '08 election cycle had begun.

A similar attention to subtle shifts in meaning is at the heart of the work of Kay Rosen and Shannon Ebner, artists whose drawings and staged photographs take language as their subject. Both are engaged with the poetic possibilities of their word choices, as well as (more recently) the

Below: Shannon Ebner, *Is Dead*, ink-jet prints on wood panels (96 x 192 in.), 2006. Courtesy the artist and Wallspace, New York. Commission for “Trace” at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York

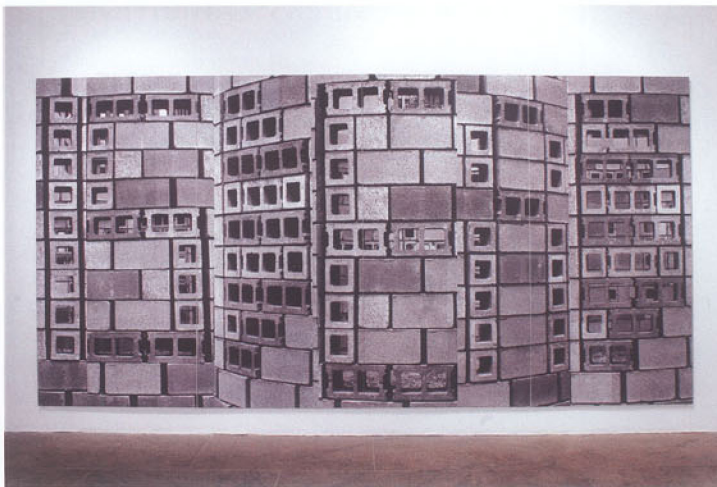
reworking of ideological verbiage, such as that surrounding the ongoing political and social upheaval in this country. The color-saturated drawings and wall works of Rosen and the predominantly achromatic photographs produced by Ebner create a



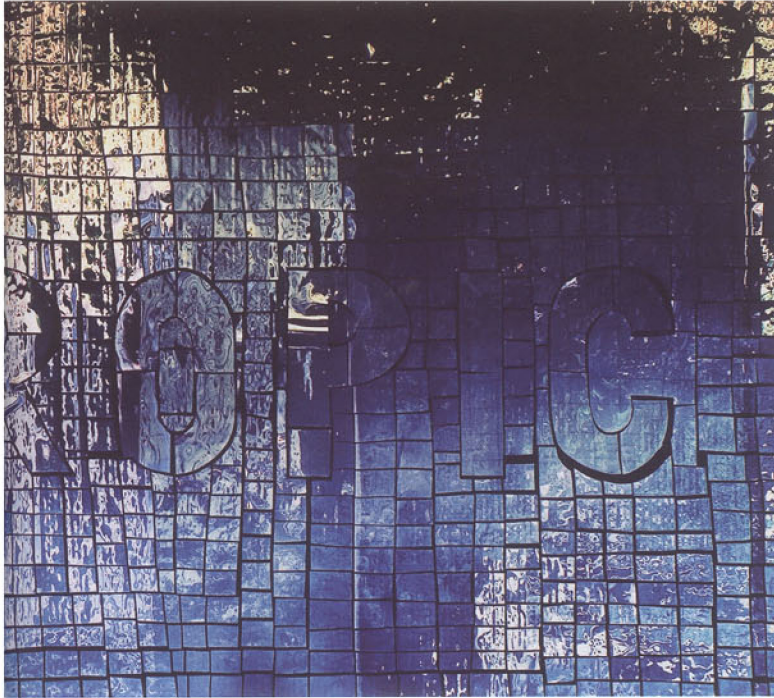
zoomed-in approach to language that encourages a viewer to focus on how graphic treatment or context affects understanding. In many of their works, language is blown up to the scale of billboards and signage, becoming almost corporeal.

Rosen’s work focuses on how the application of color, the permutation of letters—which are swapped, doubled, and reshuffled—as well as aural cadence can affect meaning. In *Spatter Pattern* (2005), the word SPATTER is positioned above PATTERN, with the six shared letters fully aligned, causing the singular “S” to shift left and the out-of-sync “N” to be pushed right. The letters, which alternate between pink and red, create the sense that the two words are interwoven or interlocked. When questioned about her process Rosen has said, “It’s hard for me to separate the conceptual and physical sides of production. . . . It feels a little like building the words, and in the end, the work functions more like an object.”

Ebner also takes a sculptural approach







Left: Shannon Ebner, *OPIC*, C-print, silkscreen (36 3/4 x 76 15/16 in.), 2007. Courtesy the artist and Wallspace, New York

Below: Kay Rosen, *Spatter Pattern*, colored pencil on paper (17 x 24 in.), 2005. Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert, New York and Paris

to her subject matter, building and reworking each word or phrase until it is ready for its photographic close-up. Some are cut out of cardboard and propped up (*Dead Democracy Letters*). Others are stretched across plastic (*Untitled [Is Exploded]*) or

built out of cinder blocks (*Dead on the Inside*). For her most recent solo show in New York, the words appeared to be etched—as well as spray-painted and handwritten—on hovering, transparent layers of glass or plastic, through which one could



see scenes from Los Angeles. These textual interventions, once recorded, appear to be forever rooted in the landscapes where they are photographed. Ebner says they deal with “language as material,” which is “scopically explored, reconsidered and possibly reprocessed before slipping back into the flow of circulation.”

Both artists also animate language by infusing their work with traces of a prior action. In Rosen’s *Blurred*, a wall painting, the three-lettered words “Blu” and “Red” (painted in their designated colors) straddle a purple “R.” The implication is that the color of both words equally infiltrated the “R” at some point after the artist painted the work and before the viewer arrived. In Ebner’s *Democratizing*, the word is written in salt on asphalt and then partially wiped out by a visually absent water source. The making and unmaking of the word creates an “after” effect where partial legibility undermines the term’s ideological power.

When placed in such intelligent hands as Ebner and Rosen, the sculptural possibilities of language become ripe with potential and familiar words seem wholly original. They recycle and filter language in a way that sheds excess weight and material, tailoring it not for efficiency but highlighting its elasticity and linguistic possibility.