

# ARTFORUM



Ricci Albenda, *Garden*, 2009, acrylic on multiple panels. Installation view, library of the Rachofsky House, Dallas.

## Ricci Albenda

### RACHOFSKY HOUSE

HOW DOES A HOUSE SPEAK? Le Corbusier's famous declaration that a house is "a machine for living" may preclude any notion that a house—particularly an exemplar of austere postmodernism, such as Richard Meier's Rachofsky House in Dallas—could say anything in the way of messiness or chaos or incongruity and subjectivity. The Rachofsky House sits moored to the ground, a tightly composed network of right angles, white planes, and plate-glass squares and rectangles. But of course, true to Meier's ideals, the structure is not blind to its surroundings; it drinks them in and exposes the inside to the outside. The impression that it is autonomous, that it could be airlifted out of its site, placed anywhere, and function as it does now, is an illusion. The same is true of Ricci Albenda's paintings, many of which the artist created specifically for the house this past summer, in an exhibition titled "The Quick Brown Fox Jumps over the Lazy Dog." It was the first time this venue, which usually features pieces from Howard and Cindy Rachofsky's extensive contemporary collection, was given over to a single artist. Albenda

used his works to create a dialogue with Meier's building, and he instilled the normally reticent domicile with a myriad of utterances and articulations.

The pangram of the show's title—employing every letter of the English alphabet—reflected Albenda's rigorously inclusive aesthetic. In the kitchen, one saw a series of drawings following the artist's meticulous recipe for ascribing a specific color to each letter of the alphabet, so that each letter aligns with the progression of the natural spectrum. Albenda named his formula COLOR-I-ME-TRY, and it assigns each vowel to either a primary or a secondary color, with the consonants falling accordingly onto other hues. But the system is not rigid; once in place, Albenda can adjust it to accommodate countless saturations and values.

Each room in the Rachofsky House hosted a series of paintings utilizing variations on the COLOR-I-ME-TRY formula. In the library, a cozy room on the second floor, a suite of horizontal canvases announced the names of plants that could be found on the grounds of the house or in Albenda's own garden in Brooklyn. Latin classifications such as HELLEBORUS, YPSILANDRA THIBETICA, and SCILLA SCILLOIDES littered the walls, a word salad of tightly composed letters painted in pastels that complement the various background shades of green. The paintings are themselves a catalogue of the outside world, imported into the very room designated for the systematic storage of knowledge.

As in the library, Albenda's paintings echoed the function of each room in the house. The bedroom contained various words on white backgrounds, the artist's own pangram, giving rise to nonsensical neologisms such as ZWACK, VIFTH, and SQUOX. The letters are vibrant and rainbow-hued, and in some instances the serifs of the font appeared to bleed into one another, suggesting the kerning of letterpresses. The words looked and sounded as if they could be in English, but they are fabrications. This was a room for dreaming, after all, where the mind invents scenarios, images, and words that exceed the structures of everyday life.

In every room, Albenda's paintings announced themselves clearly and forcefully. This was especially apparent in the large central living area, which opens onto two floors of the house and is visible from almost every peripheral room. Here Albenda hung his most aggressive paintings. Large white canvases made declarations such as YOU'RE GREEDY, AND YOU'RE SELFISH and NO REASON TO SAY NO. These paintings seemed to be blunt statements, meant to be apprehended quickly as literal messages or dialogue. But unlike Ed Ruscha or Lawrence Weiner, Albenda has painstakingly worked over his text according to the COLOR-I-ME-TRY system. The longer one stared at the

paintings, the more the letters, which appeared at first to be inky black and monochromatic, gave way to muddied hues of purple, red, and green. Once these calibrations became obvious, the phrases in the paintings became freighted with additional signification. This, in essence, is the *raison d'être* of Albenda's color system—to investigate the relationship between visual and linguistic modes of comprehension. Often, the variations in color and slight formal modifications of typeface (sometimes Albenda paints with one eye closed or plays with perspective in order to manifest inconsistencies in his perception) cause the viewer to see language as a unique entity, divorced from its status as painted word. In this way, the statements remain in one's mind as would an object—they exist in a space beyond the confines of two-dimensional canvases.

Just as Albenda's paintings of words and phrases are vehicles for his experiments in perception and difference, he also explores the way language can endow objects with an ambiguous preciousness. In the library, a pressed flower in an old copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* featured the word SPOKE meticulously painted onto a single narrow petal, simultaneously suggesting the recitation of poetry and the spoke of a wheel. On a shelf in the second-floor hallway, the word PETER appeared painted on a scrap of pizza crust. Both these pieces were encased in Plexiglass vitrines, and especially in the case of *peter*. circa 1992, the objects and their inscribed words assumed the status of relics. These objects could have been scale models of the Rachofsky House itself—glass boxes that open themselves to the scrutiny of the outside world, with an interior language that at once animates and fixes its subjects.

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