

David Hutchinson

Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery

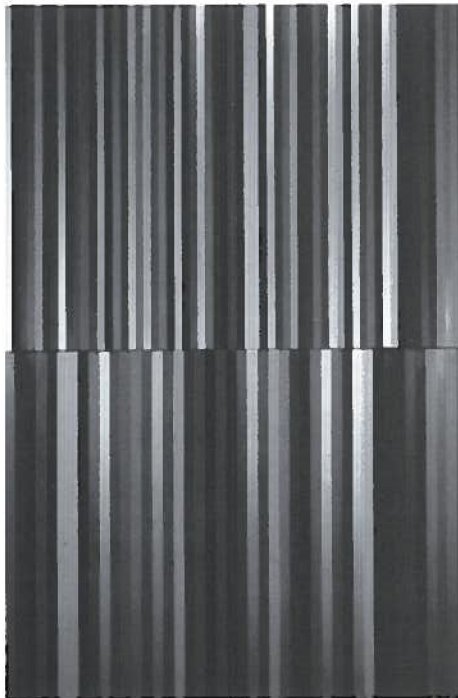
Leo Costello

The work of David Hutchinson is both comprised of and surrounded by text. This may not be immediately apparent in the New York-based artist's recent show at Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, comprised of four large-scale paintings of thin vertical color bars stacked in two registers, and four smaller black and white portraits. But this display represents Hutchinson's most sophisticated and complex exploration to date of the relationship of word and image—a theme that has occupied him for much of his career.

Text, of course, has been a fluid and dynamic term in modern art, used sometimes as a playful formal and thematic element (Cubism and Jasper Johns), as a means of both celebrating and critiquing mass culture (Pop Art) and as a vehicle for conveying personal, psychological intensity (Cy Twombly). Hutchinson, however, has made text itself his subject, using the work of the French writer/criminal Jean Genet as a point of departure. For an earlier project, Hutchinson wrote out the French text of a Genet poem and then overlaid it with an English translation. The results were dense, almost geometric areas of marks in which both the artist's own lilted handwriting and the words of Genet were almost completely hidden. The artist thereby demonstrates how the act of translation obscures the meaning of the text it means to represent. Even more, the artist himself becomes a translator, turning the symbols of Genet's text into visual form.

Large color paintings continue Hutchinson's meditation on the act of translation. Here, he starts with a sentence taken from Genet's 1947 novel *Querelle de Brest*. Each letter is represented by a color bar but the association between the two is essentially arbitrary, as Hutchinson matches the letter to the first letter of the English name of paint color. Thus, "a" stands for aquamarine, "c" for crimson, etc., with gray representing spaces between words. Further complexity is added by Hutchinson's juxtaposition of the English translation of a sentence in the top register with the French below, so that the original text becomes literally a subtext. Moreover, the process of translation into an image distinctly alters the tone of that text. While the original sentences are alternately flirtatious, coy and provocative, the cool formalism of the paintings purges the sexuality and violence inherent in so much of Genet's writing. The furtive, intensely drawn images of a seated figure along one wall turn out to be translations themselves, in this case an Alberto Giacometti portrait of Genet.

Having completed coursework for a doctorate in philosophy, Hutchinson's work is steeped in twentieth-century theories of text and language—those



David Hutchinson, *Without Cracking a Smile...*, 2003
Acrylic on Linen
60 x 90 inches

of Jacques Derrida, among others (the artist also cites Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as important influences). In short, Derrida examines traditional dichotomies such as black/white and sun/moon and discovers that in each case, one of the terms is privileged over the other. Further, Derrida proceeds to show that the greater term depends not upon any inherent qualities for its stature but instead upon its relation to the lesser term. The establishment of definitive meaning is constantly forestalled by this play of difference. In Derridean fashion, therefore, Hutchinson addresses the dichotomy of word/image. His paintings, in fact, represent precisely neither words nor images, but instead the products of back and forth transactions between the two terms. Each painting undoubtedly has a distinctive tone, sometimes warm and lush, other times chilly and discordant but again, these qualities result not from anything inherent in the text but from the play of translation.

What is finally most remarkable and exciting about Hutchinson's work is that it subtly draws the viewer into an active state of contemplation. Indeed, as one studies the paintings, one begins to be aware of a certain ability to "read" them. In one painting, for instance, one can identify the presence of cognates



David Hutchinson, *The Notion of Murder...*, 2002
Acrylic on Linen
60 x 90 inches

(“Querelle” and “lieutenant”) by recognizing shared patterns of color bars even though the width of the bars is modified based on the number of letters in the French and English sentences. Like the best theory-driven art, Hutchinson's work is not a watered-down illustration of someone else's ideas. Instead, his practice activates theory and puts it to work without forgetting the particular opportunities and necessities of working in a visual medium. It provokes careful study and contemplation and allows us to make our own discoveries about how it works within and beyond a complex web of ideas.

Leo Costello is Curatorial Assistant for Prints, Drawings and Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He received a Ph.D. in art history from Bryn Mawr College.