

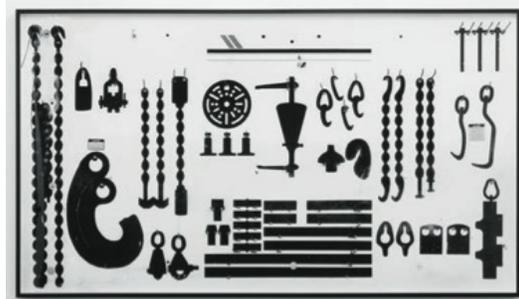
ARTFORUM

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 Shannon Ebner, Wallspace
 By Lauren O'Neill-Butler

To some extent, Shannon Ebner’s work has always played with thresholds of legibility. A case in point, the large-scale print *Instrumentals* (all works cited, 2013) was hung in the back room of her recent exhibition at Wallspace, where it spellbound the viewer into bewilderment. This flat-toned depiction of seemingly unusual (but in fact quite common) objects appeared to carry some indexical trace, although the connection to a source was left ambiguous. Taken in an auto-body shop in Los Angeles, the photograph is a to-scale representation of a stark white wall, onto which silhouettes of tools have been carefully painted in black, presumably to indicate to workers where the various implements—rulers, pliers, and the like—should hang after they’ve been used. The idea to depict this scene likely came naturally to Ebner when she stumbled upon it, as the striking array of painted shapes bear some resemblance to the various works for which she is best known. Suspended between photographic depiction and graphic illustration, *Instrumentals* offers up these silhouettes, these images, as words. Ebner’s meanderings through her local LA neighborhoods, where she sieves the landscape for “language,” suggest that these thresholds of legibility reside latently everywhere.

Spanning two adjacent walls in the gallery’s first room, *The Man in the White Hat Dropped It* consists of eighteen framed prints depicting cardboard letters forming broken-up words and (already nonsensical) phrases or tags culled from various paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ebner displays these fragmented painted words—beginning with the titular phrase—with several empty or blank spaces between the letters, implying pauses and breaks. To read the work, one must participate in a jagged choreography of falling and rising: eyes moving right, slightly down, slightly right again, down—repeat—and then back up to the top of the next section, or next picture. Another fusion of image and language, this photographic found poetry is a gentle and surprising homage to an artist whose oeuvre has, for some, taken on a patina of kitsch. In this gesture of reclamation, Ebner points to a radicality and rigor that have perhaps lain dormant for too long under Basquiat’s otherwise bombastic popularity.

Erasing or crossing out words and fragmenting figures was a way for Basquiat to be both present and absent in his work, which is yet another compelling strategy that Ebner integrated into this show. At least that’s what I thought as my mind was melted by *An Unrested Image*, a very short looped video showing a rapidly rotating photograph Ebner took of a friend’s scarred, post-op FTM torso, the spinning nipple turning into a seeing eye, continuously trying to find a point of focus. This unceasing movement of the stilled body serves as a counterpoint to the ubiquity of language in Ebner’s work, perhaps revealing an allegorical portrait of the artist herself—searching unendingly for her own place within the limits of language, and therefore the world.



Shannon Ebner, *Instrumentals*, 2013, ink-jet print, 75 x 42.5"