

## Stop Yelling at Me

"I like to think of myself as an ad executive who is her own client," explains Dwyer. "My approach is about communication and invention. It doesn't ever directly address art history."

These words by artist Nancy Dwyer may seem a strange admission in a field that has always maintained a rigorous separation between the worlds of fine and commercial art. Yet it is precisely this attitude that sets the work apart from that of her peers. Dwyer employs a visual vocabulary, literally. Words are the substance and subject of her bold graphic paintings, wall reliefs and sculptures. In one painting entitled "Brains", each letter of the word is positioned on a white billiard ball as though floating, scrambled in deep blue space. Similarly, a sculpture of the word "LIE" is fabricated of onyx formica and stands on the floor like an accusatory coffee table. In both works, the words function as both form and content, as landscapes, portraits and genre scenes for a contemporary sensibility.

A number of artists coming of age in the '80s have opted for using words in their work, hijacking the media's language as the voice of authority and then, like visual ventriloquists, have invested new emphasis to oft-heard clichés. The gesture is not unlike artists of the same generation who have attempted to resuscitate the fatigued formal style of geometric abstraction.

Where Dwyer's art differs from some of her peers' is in her attitude of indifference both to the hallowed aesthetics bestowed on fine art and to the lack of esteem in which commercial art is steeped. Minimizing neither endeavour, Dwyer rejects the automatic ironic distancing and formal awareness of an elitist vantage point. Instead, she has developed an interest in the strategies that conspire to determine what constitutes fine art: "I never thought of art as an investigation of beauty—I didn't think that was my job—but as a way to learn and see. I assumed there were enough beautiful things".

And yet Dwyer's objects and paintings have all the sly visual appeal of the most seductive commercial graphic as well as an instinct for the beauty of form embodied in the best works of art. The words are presented as images and conjure up associative feelings and thoughts. "Words are pictures today," notes Dwyer. "Perception has changed and we see differently than we did 50 years ago, or 200 years ago. We're to the point where words are a new version of pictures."

Where, for many, the formalism of minimalist sculpture represents a void of meaning, Dwyer has made it the support and background for her self-expressive lexicon. Love and lust, life and death, sin and redemption, themes which have historically preoccupied artists are Dwyer's palette. But they are recalled as reductivist blocks of form or panels of color, drawing to our attention, how such shapes and hues have become the anonymous and ubiquitous signature of corporate graphics.

In paintings like "Any Day Now", three-dimensional letters float amid a grid in space. The image—which looks like the animated promo for a puerile sit-com—appears to have been generated by a computer. Yet the actual technique is decidedly low-tech. Each letter is built as a cardboard model, photographed and painted onto the canvas by using an opaque projector. "I make originals of things that are made in a graphic way, that are never meant to be original," explains Dwyer. "I was interested in the way packaging was becoming the content of everything."

In rejecting the hi-tech in favor of her own system of production, Dwyer directs our focus to the content of her art—the future, where promises and expectations may or not be fulfilled. This becomes the message of a painting featuring the false, but infinite space of the TV logo background and the lure of "Coming up next . . ." In its new context, the pop phrase loses its sheen of irrelevancy and is reconstituted as inquiry.

The materials and the scale of Dwyer's work are very often based upon systems of public address, specifically the technology designed to seduce or direct the busy consumer. The smooth articial surfaces—plastic, formica, mirror and plexiglas—remind us of the familiar environments of airports and bank lobbies. Dwyer's phrases capture the quality of waiting, the padded ennui that takes up so much of our time. The brown Formica and beige leather-topped letters of the word-cum-seating arrangement, "STAY" embody both the authoritative command and the pleading request. A pile of stuffed leather letters spelling out the word "p-h-o-n-e-c-a-l-l-s" resonates with multiple associations suggesting the instrument of our pain and pleasure, our efficiency and procrastination, our umbilical cord and noose. The title is "Phonecalls, Lightyears."

Predominantly all capitals in real or illusionistic 3-D, Dwyer's chosen typefaces are emphatically public. While she may use the loony non-lingual contractions of ad-speak, such as "EZ", what captivates us about Dwyer's words is their very personal and private nature. The laconic wit and confessional tone recalls the work of Ed Ruscha, though her physical presentation is quite different. Her double speak is double-entendre born of the tension between big public forms and private, poignant, and at times poetic language. With deceptive simplicity, sculptures like "EVERYTHING" or its fractional equivalent " $E = MC^2$ " leave us wondering at the wonder. We swallow the word instantly but its reverberations stay with us for a long time after. For, although the system of representation is public, and the public is the intended audience, Dwyer's words are drawn from that most intimate of private domain, the imagination.

Speaking of the late 20th century confusion of the public and the private, Jean Baudrillard writes: "With the disappearance of the public space, advertising invades everything (the street, the monument, the market, the stage, language) . . . The private space undergoes the same fate . . . The distinction between an interior and an exterior, which

was just what characterized the domestic stage of objects and that of a symbolic space of the object has been blurred in a double obscenity . . . Obscenity begins when in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication. "We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication." (Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*," 1988 *Semiotext(e)*, Foreign Agents Series).

Consciousness of this contemporary dilemma lies at the heart of Dwyer's work. The 'ecstasy of communication' can be found in her painting "Love Life" which delivers its monolithic, capitalized 3-D message hurled upside down from above. The painting's steel gray and crimson surfaces bring to mind the neutrality of hard-edge abstraction. Yet the words are read, too, as personal musings: a relationship, perhaps plunging downward; a sizzling cinematic romance; or an affirmative philosophical choice. Here, as in so much of Dwyer's work, we see the most private and public concerns conflated in Technicolor.

The cliché says that every picture is worth a thousand words. Dwyer's art implies that we can reverse that ratio.

Hunter Drohojowska is Chair, Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, a division of the New School for Social Research.