

Three-Letter Word

Anastasi's Soho exhibit of paintings, prints and sculpture center on a sometimes loaded term: Jew.

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In 1981 William Anastasi, the internationally recognized conceptual artist, was looking for words of a particular kind. His criterion was that the words be listed in the dictionary as noun, verb, and adjective, at the same time. His search yielded among others, "blind," "light," "mother," "swamp." And then he found the word "Jew." Calling it "the most charged word in the English language," it became a recurring presence in Anastasi's work over the next 15 years. Eleven of the paintings, prints, and sculpture are gathered together in a challenging exhibition titled, "The Painting of the Word Jew," now at the Sandra Gering Gallery in Soho.

Upon entering the gallery we are confronted by three very large paintings (two over 10 feet square), as well as a number of smaller pieces. The style of the paintings range from graphically minimal to animatedly abstract. There are a number of altered photographs and photo reproductions, with a coolly conceptual approach. Whatever the style, we are struck by the insistent, repeated presence of the single word, "jew" (at times capitalized), inscribed on each piece. The typographical style of the words is significant. They most often appear as enormously enlarged versions of uneven typewriter characters, evocative of the earlier part of this century.

A large painting (untitled as is usually the case here), is comprised of four black squares joined to make a single larger square, with a central cross formed where the sections meet. In the upper left quadrant the word "jude" is in white. The basic format is repeated with telling stylistic variations. In "Breath," a sta-



tic-like gray holds the word, "jew" in the emptiness of blank canvas. In an unusually vivid painting with a welter of red and green brush strokes, the word "jew," small and black, remains untouched. In all these paintings, the hermetic and timeless space of abstract art has been invaded by an unsettling historical provocation.

The conundrum of how we are to take Anastasi's work is deepened by two versions of a color photo reproduction of Jesus from da Vinci's "Last Supper." Here the word, "Jew" hangs like a misplaced caption on the robed chest of Jesus. We can't help but be reminded of the playful defacement of another of da Vinci's cultural icons, when Marcel Duchamp (an influence on Anastasi's work) painted a mustache on a copy of Mona Lisa. Here the subversion takes a serious turn. With the title of the larger version, "Delay," Anastasi seems to ask us to recognize both the scriptural amnesia and the displacement of messianic consciousness at the heart of Christian anti-Semitism.

What then are we to make of Anastasi's life-size photographic image, as he stands



William Anastasi, left, triggers camera shutter in untitled self-portrait (1987). In "Delay" (1997), top, "Jew" hangs like a misplaced caption on the robed chest of Jesus.

gripping the cable release, activating the camera which takes the picture we are viewing? This self portrait "squared" is inscribed with the word "jew," made all the more curious by the fact that the artist is not Jewish by parentage or conversion.

To name oneself is to make a paradoxical claim of self creation. To assume an identity reeking of opprobrium can imply a diluted, universalized sympathy or an imaginative act of egoless solidarity. Anastasi seems to acknowledge this ambiguity in his neon sign, which glows white with the words "Ich bin Jude," evidently a parody of John Kennedy's famous self-identification as a Berliner. In his catalogue essay, Thomas McEvilly likens Anastasi's strategy to that of Denmark's king, who in 1940, in defiance of the occupying Germans' demand that Jews wear a yellow star of David, had stars sewn onto his jackets, as did many non-Jewish Danes.

Still, it is useful to ask how Anastasi has made art from his acts of naming and claiming. McEvilly points to Anastasi's exploration of how self-referentiality can bring us to the

limits of the rational, a gambit developed by John Cage, whose Zen-like work strongly affected the artist. Take for instance one of Anastasi's early, well-known works, the life-size photo silk screen painting of a wall, exhibited hanging on that very wall. The resulting frisson begins to loosen our grip on a habitual notion of "the real." Similarly, according to McEvilly, Anastasi "invoked Lenny Bruce's explanation for his emphasis on ethnic terms, often rude ones, to the effect that one can't let these words stay under rocks or 'they grow maggots.'" To speak the unspoken diminishes its unconscious power to define reality.

But Anastasi's own statements go beyond critique, to positive identification, quoting Voltaire that, "If it were possible to be rational about religion, we all ought to become Jews," since Jesus was a Jew, and that "in the broader social and cultural sense ... we are all Jews. ... Where one ear discerns the single syllable which can conjure forth the very source of our culture, another hears an accusation wider and deeper than any language."

Some have argued that the master's tools can't be used to pull down the master's house, but Anastasi avers otherwise. He points to two basic attitudes here: "Chang Tzu cautions: 'Don't try to change the world, you'll only make matters worse.' Israel Zangwill replies 22 centuries later: 'Take from me the hope that I can change the future and you will send me mad.' Making a painting of the word Jew comes down on Zangwill's side of the debate."

In Anastasi's work we are asked to witness the collapsing of insult and identity onto a single plane of cultural discourse, one of painting's persistent, if covert messages. Western culture, embodied in the art of painting, here exposes its troubled heart in works where the promise of aesthetic pleasure is constantly interrupted by graffiti in the form of carefully rendered versions of "the most charged word in the English language." □

William Anastasi's exhibit, "The Painting of the Word Jew," is open through Nov. 15 at the Sandra Gering Gallery on 476 Broome St. in Manhattan.

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