

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artforum
May 2014

“Walls and Words”

ELDRIDGE STREET MUSEUM
12 Eldridge Street
May 6–May 16

Ten artworks that seek to decode language—by Tony Lewis, Kon Trubkovich, and Wallace Berman—now appear in the synagogue of the Eldridge Street Museum, one of the first American temples built by European Jews, in 1887 on the Lower East Side. The sparkling interior, with its gilded chandeliers, intricate stained-glass windows, and skyward mural of gold stars against a blue sky, has been offset by at once more primitive and technological mark-making: collage, rubbing, glass powdered on paper, and drawing. Curated by Joel Mesler of Untitled, the pieces in exhibition consist of a palette of mostly gray and black with some blue, green, and red, which allude to the historic building’s rich interiors and exteriors. While the show aims to present the spiritual aspects in each artist’s work as it converges with language and symbol, the conversation between their cool precision and the grandiose surroundings makes for the most valuable elucidation of language.

The show features Berman’s small, 1960s and ’70s-era Verifax collages, in which images of transistor radios meld together with Kabbalah and other ancient imagery in the palm of a disembodied hand. These hang at the entrance of the synagogue, flanked on each side of the pews by new work by Trubkovich and Lewis. Some pieces, ironically, had yet to be titled, and despite the show’s billing, some others haven’t been presented on walls at all: Rather, they dangle off the hall’s balconies from wires, as if floating. Each will have to be taken down for the Sabbath on Friday night and most of Saturday—their own presence here is both literally and metaphorically fleeting. Lewis’s two graphite rubbings on wallpaper subtly mimic the language of the stained glass behind them. His works usually include letters that, too, float as if by wires, but here these have been mostly stripped away, save for the Hebrew characters aleph and hay, connected by drawn lines placing them in a short circuit. They are just one character shy of one of the seventy-two Hebrew names for God—more closely defined as soul mate—and the missing character, replaced by a symbol, seems to ever more closely define the inexplicable.

— Ali Pechman

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