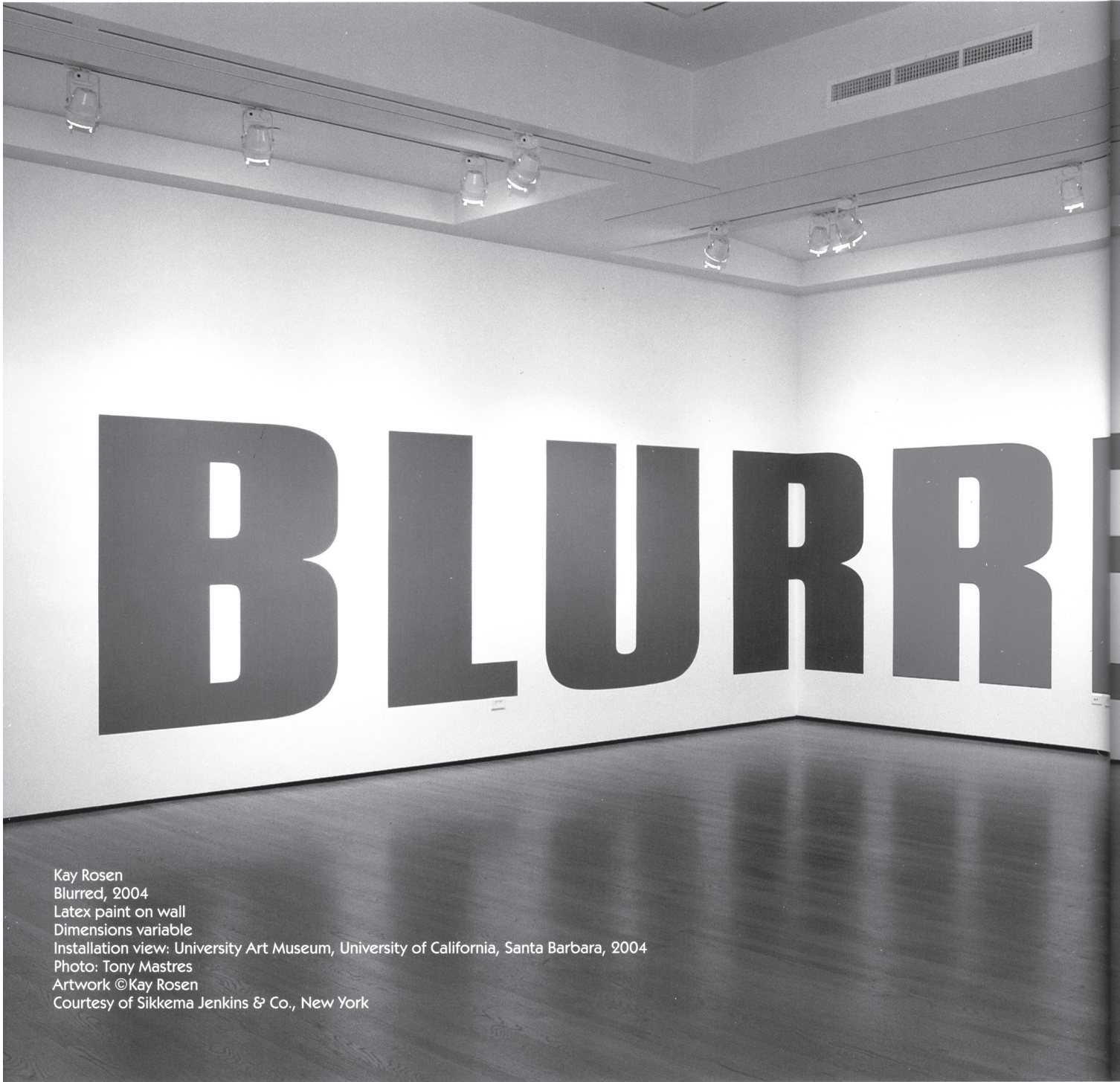


KAY KAY KAY



Kay Rosen
Blurred, 2004
Latex paint on wall
Dimensions variable
Installation view: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004
Photo: Tony Mastres
Artwork ©Kay Rosen
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

KAY

KAY ROSEN

KAY

by Cary Leibowitz

KAY

“Dear reader, if you do not know Kay Rosen’s work, please stop reading right now and look it up. Google her. Go to kayrosen.com. Examine it for a few days, then come back. Lots of pressure to write about Kay’s work. Smart grown-ups like it, and smart children like it, too. But I still feel like I am Don Rickles at a Dean Martin roast. You know they roasted Truman Capote.”

Before I ever met Kay Rosen I liked her work.

I didn’t really try to imagine what she looked like, but I think I was picturing a Jewish Helen Hunt living in Brooklyn Heights or maybe Carroll Gardens or Park Slope.

The first time I actually met her was in a hotel in Washington, D.C. She was playing Scrabble with Elliot Spitzer and they were having some intimate double-vowel thing going on at the bar.

He wasn’t governor yet, and she hadn’t had her “retrospective” in LA yet, but then again we were all young and open to new ideas.

(That’s the roast part.)

It WAS in a hotel in D.C. and I WAS imagining a Jewish Helen Hunt, but she was with some other artists. We were all in a group show together.

We were introduced, and I was immediately fascinated by her very southern, very exotic accent.

She is from Corpus Christi, Texas, y’all.

I never looked at (read) her work with a southern accent—it was a revelation.

ED

FRUIT
DiSH

Kay Rosen
Still Life, 1993
Enamel sign paint on canvas
17-5/8" x 23-1/8" (44.77 x 58.74 cm)
Artwork © 1993 Kay Rosen
Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Sort of like learning that Beethoven was deaf.

For lack of a cleaner word I would say that Kay is a modernist. I guess I mean this in a very pure, catholic sense.

She doesn't rely on nostalgia or sentimentality or a painfully descriptive brushstroke. Thankfully she's no Anselm Kiefer.

Her drippiest piece (besides *Leak*) is probably *Bleed*, which is the word *wound* drawn with marker on paper and presented to the viewer from the reverse side, the inking soaking through.

It's all very direct. As Frank Stella sort-of kind-of said, what you see is what you see, and then you translate it or have someone smart translate it for you, and you can see it better, maybe even laugh.

That's the thing about Kay—she is so serious about her work, but her work usually has a punch line.

Maybe she is the Bea Arthur of the art world—or maybe the Agatha Christie of the art world—sitting at her table, crafting a plot, and delicately severing letters from our universe, twisting them into showing their hidden meanings that need to come to the surface.

“the letter *u* in the second syllable with a mallet”

Maybe it's her downfall. Ed Ruscha has his territory and place in the art world.

Lawrence Weiner has his territory and place in the art world.

Joseph Kosuth has his territory and place in the art world.

Jeez, even Hanne Darboven has marked her territory
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Jeez, even Hanne Darboven has marked her territory

Kay should be on/in that pantheon, too, but the art world doesn't like punch lines/personality/pickles.

(Is it a Jewish thing? I won't go there in this magnum opus/
Magna Carta.)

I must admit my favorite description of Kay's work was in Roberta Smith's review of her show in 2006.



Kay Rosen
Divisibility, 1987/2009
Dimensions variable
Installation view: Learning Modern,
School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009
Photo: James Prinz Photography
Artwork © Kay Rosen
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Kay Rosen might be described as a writer's sculptor.

Kay is a painter. She likes painting. She doesn't distance herself from the work.

It's all so perfect. It's easy for viewers to assume it's been screen-printed or mass-produced somewhere.

But no-no, Kay hand-paints.

If you call her there is a 50 percent chance she'll say "I'm painting an *E* and will have to call you back."

She also hasn't gotten caught up in the gallery biz of bigger is better is bigger is more salable.

Her paintings are quirky esoteric proportions.

Roberta Smith was referencing Kay's wall painting in that perfect comparison, but I feel all her works have a very dimensional, sculptural quality.

I remember years ago Kay and I were "lamenting"

how awful the art world is, how awful dealers are, how awful curators are,

and she said she would like to be a toll booth collector.

Maybe the State of Indiana can give Kay a job redesigning/rewriting license plates.

An example of Kay's transcendental secret language: In the early '90s, I organized a video-performance with some friends.

We were going to "cheer" Kay Rosen works.

À la cheerleading. Sis boom bah, ra rah.

give me an M give me an R give me a D give me an R give me an M give me an R give me a D give me an R what does it spell?! Mister dream reader!!

We went to a children's playground in Little Italy one weekend morning and there was a little girl and her brother, maybe about eight and six years old.

I explained what we were going to do, and they wanted to do it, too.





It was amazing how they “picked up” the language and how the works/words were very real for them and not some funny, made up, no-nonsense sort of mumbo jumbo.

Contrary to most people in the art world, Kay is also a really good listener and has a million friends.

She probably is friends with more gay men in the art world than anyone else I know—including Brent Sikkema.

I’m not sure this has much relevance when discussing her “oeuvre,” but I can be easily convinced there is an important connection.

She has the best laugh both sides of the M I S S I S S I P P I, too!

Kay is a special person and I mean it!

You can hear Kay’s laugh from across the room—it’s really generous and welcoming.

I think you can say the same about her works. You can see them from a distance and there is nothing off-putting or ominous about them, or sneaky.

Officially Kay has said:

“When it comes to reading my work, throw out all the rules you ever learned: spelling, spacing, capitalization, margins, linear reading, composition . . . all your old reading habits will be useless.”

As I prefaced earlier, smart people like her work, but honestly sometimes I am suspicious of Europeans who like it.

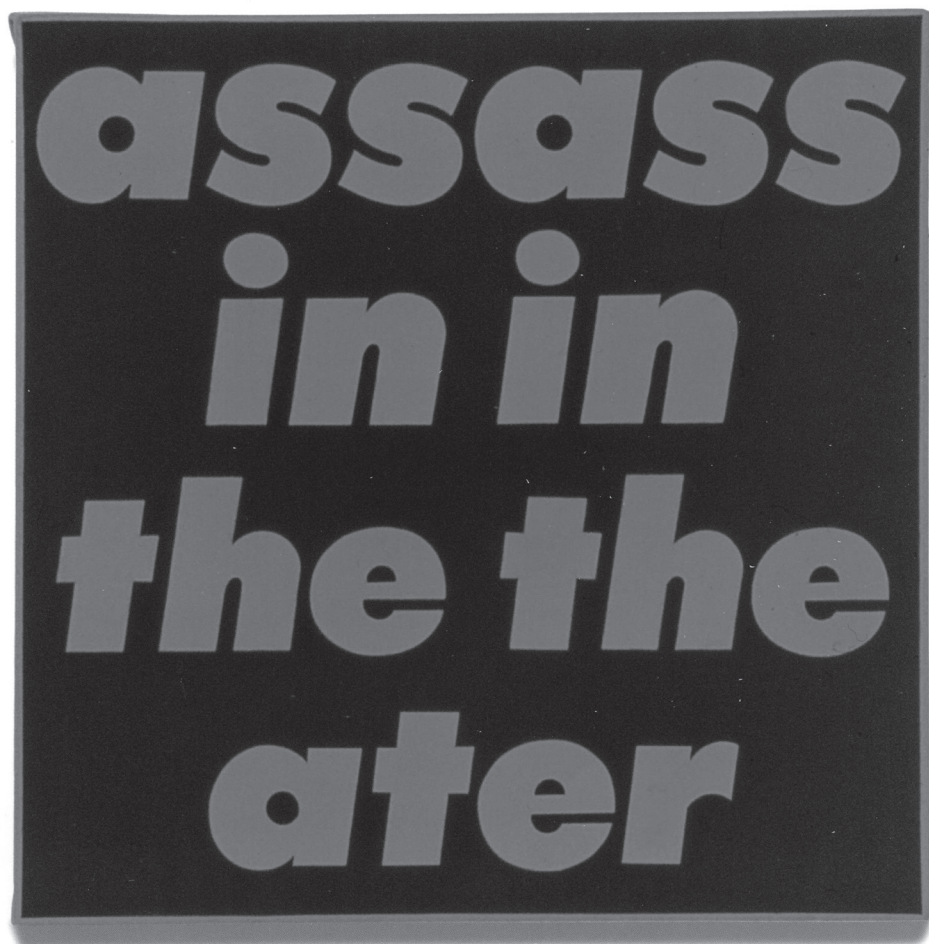
—not that Europeans aren’t smart—no no.

I think it’s an openness, not an IQ thing.

Do they really get it? Or is this it: They don’t get it and assume everyone doesn’t get it—sort of a Duchampian mystery—and no one will ever know what she really meant.

Someday in the very very very very very very distant future Kay will die and will be buried with all the vowels and consonants.

The world will be a different plate lace mace grace.



Kay Rosen
John Wilkes Booth, 1988
Sign paint on canvas
20x20 inches (50.8x50.8 cm)
Artwork © Kay Rosen
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

ROOF

FLOOR

Kay Rosen
Leak, 1997
Latex paint on wall
Dimensions variable
Installation view: Galerie Michael Cosar, Dusseldorf, 1997
Artwork © Kay Rosen
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

The Man Who Would
Be King
The Man Who Would
Be B.B. King
The Man Who Would
Be Queen Bee
The Man Who Would
Be Aunt Bea
The Man Who Would
Be Bea Arthur
The Man Who Would
Be King Arthur
The Man Who Would
Be Art King