

Jerry Iverson

A big difference between my Language Series and other art that uses words is that mine definitely, absolutely, undoubtedly don't say anything.

During the summers when he was in college, South Dakota native Jerry Iverson worked on ranches in Montana, and he came to stay in 1977, settling in the Big Timber area of South Central Montana. Though he'd studied philosophy at Saint Olaf College, he'd always been interested in art, and in a scenario that vaguely echoes the lives of the cowboy artists, Iverson began to keep a sketchbook during the summers when he worked as a camp tender for a sheep outfit in the Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains. The scope of his experiences and knowledge of gritty, backcountry Montana broadened in the next few years as he learned the sheep shearing trade, which, he says, takes five years to master and brings with it "suffering of Biblical proportions." Iverson began to spend the off-season months, from May to December, making rough, brightly colored figurative paintings about rural life. These paintings, accomplished in an energetic, witty, and formally sophisticated cross-fertilization of folk art and German Expressionism were well received in venues from Portland to New York.

In 1988, he commenced work on a deeper and more abstract theme in a major group of paintings which he calls the *Language Series*. "The subject of my *Language* paintings is the written word, how it looks and what it means," he says. "We use language to express thoughts and emotions. Often these thoughts and emotions are difficult to articulate. They come out incomplete, chaotic and in fragments. These paintings are concerned with the difficulty and failure of understanding. They only show parts of words, so much is missing. Yet they contain the hope that even the attempt to speak can produce something of interest or balance or beauty."

The *Language* paintings are large, and sometimes brutal in their appearance. Many of them approach the scale and feeling of walls that have been hammered together, patched and layered with all sorts of materials—varied types of lumber, newsprint, tissue and toilet paper, glues and varnishes, roofing material, burlap, cardboard, rice paper, maps and other printed papers. Like the interiors of homestead shacks on the Northern Great Plains, the paintings seem to be plastered with anything that comes to hand in a desperate effort to stop up the cracks and keep out the dirt, the bugs and, most of all, the cold. Fierce, defensive responses to the harsh climate, of both the geography and society of rural Montana, Iverson's paintings are graffitied with bold tar, ink and soot markings. These stark and blunt black markings sometimes read like indecipherable fragments of a broken language, or oaths and epithets frozen in the snowbanks of a persistent winter of the soul.

As the series has developed, Iverson's abstract "handwriting" has become more painterly and subtle in its inflections, and his experiments with diverse materials and techniques have yielded an almost unexpected sense of formal control. The ready references to rough construction and rural graffiti, confusion and inarticulateness, fall away in the commanding presence of these powerfully articulate paintings. They have become forceful statements, not in verbal language, but in the visible language of durable form.

With its thick, coagulated white surface and dense black bands of soot, run-through with skeins of white-turned-to-gray *Language* 225, painted in 1998, looks like a product of elemental struggle. The tension between the gritty, black bars, gravity-fed paint and the vertical edge of the panel is a singular statement of the loose/tight, black and white dynamics and drama that animate all of Iverson's best work.

Language 245, of 1999, with four big panels butted together, measuring eight feet by twelve feet, is densely marked with long, horizontal rows of predominantly vertical, calligraphic strokes. The painting—with its countless layers of newsprint, tissue paper, white paint and ink, and variations of surface density, translucency and opacity—is dense, complicated and rhythmically muscular, almost percussive. Bringing to mind a description applied to the work of Jackson Pollock, *Language* 245 is like "energy made visible."

The *Untitled* series paintings are a distillation of the formal and technical facility that Iverson has gained through the years. Made of dime-store tissue paper, sumi ink, rabbit skin glue and varnish applied to gessoed chip-board panels, these compositions are collaged as much as they are painted. Light areas and black strokes alike are built up in dozens of layers to achieve remarkably powerful effects of translucency and solid density of form.

Jerry Iverson was raised on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and he lives today, with his wife Linda, a landscape designer, about 14 washboard, dirt road miles outside Big Timber. He does most of his painting in a homestead-era cabin, finishing up the large pieces in a prefab metal barn. Widely exhibited in Montana, his work has been seen in exhibitions at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, the Holter Museum of Art in Helena, Missoula Museum of the Arts, and the Emerson Cultural Center and Beall Park Art Center in Bozeman, among many other venues. His work has been shown at commercial galleries on both coasts, including: Cavin-Morris Gallery and Littlejohn Contemporary in New York City, and Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery in Portland, where he has had five individual exhibitions. In 1997, his work was selected for inclusion in the Open Studios Press publication, *New American Paintings*, Western Edition, juried by Clare Bell, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.