

Sounding the Alarm, in Words and Light



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ART REVIEW

“Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect”, including “Red Yellow Looming,” above and other Holzer from the past 15 years, is at the Whitney Museum of American Art continues through May 31..

Basically, Jenny Holzer has spent the last three decades pelting us with unsettling and increasingly relevant portents of things to come.

In tones alternately poetic or oracular, inflamed or numb, Big-Brotherly or tender, Ms. Holzer’s terse snippets of prose have warned of evolving threats to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She has tracked the inner thoughts of bereft lovers or shellshocked survivors and articulated the baser instincts unleashed by social chaos.

To do this, she has turned various user-friendly, pop-culture modes of public address into early warning systems, including posters, T-shirts, billboards, broadsheets, plaques, giant projections and incised marble benches. Electronic LED signs are her best-known, most spectacular method; they also reflect the military-commercial-entertainment complex that, bit by bit, her art exposes.

Ms. Holzer has infused Conceptual Art’s playful language with real-life seriousness and has put words in Minimalism’s sleek mouth. And few contemporary artists have as much

right as she to say this: I told you so.

Two of her most familiar phrases — written at least 25 years ago — could bracket the political turmoil and material excess of the United States during the last decade. “Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise” is from her 1977-79 “Truisms” series. “Protect Me From What I Want” is from her 1983-85 “Survival” series. Equally pertinent in the era of Abu Ghraib and Gitmo, and also from “Survival,” is the chillingly convoluted “Die fast and quiet when they interrogate you or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore.”

This grim directive pulses every so often along the extended LED signs of “For Chicago,” the large and dazzling new work that leads off the spare, 15-year survey of Ms. Holzer’s work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show’s title, “Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect,” sums up the frantic, maternal impulse behind the work.

“For Chicago” reminds us that Ms. Holzer extensively recycles her writings; it uses all of them, from “Truisms” to “Oh” (2001). But the piece also exemplifies her continual quest for maximum visual impact.

Using recently developed, thinner-than-ever LED signs, “For Chicago” is the first Holzer piece made specifically to lie flat on the floor. Its 11 48-foot-long LED signs, placed parallel about two feet apart, nearly reduce language to pure light. Stand at the end of the piece, and the words seem to flow from your shoes. The whole configuration suggests a lighted runway or weirdly geometric rows of crocuses in a field. As the punctuation-averse artist herself might put it, the piece means to stop you in your tracks and does.

Born in 1950 in Gallipolis, Ohio, Ms. Holzer belongs to the feminist branch of a post-Post-Minimalist generation of artists that emerged around 1980, looking for new ways to make narrative or commentary an implicit part of visual objects. Her nearest contemporaries include Cindy Sherman, Sarah Charlesworth and Louise Lawler. But Barbara Kruger is most like-minded in sensibility and in the ambition to fuse reading and seeing, taking language beyond words so that it becomes immersive and experiential.

The Whitney show emphasizes this ambition, featuring only eight LED pieces surrounded by lots of empty space,

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