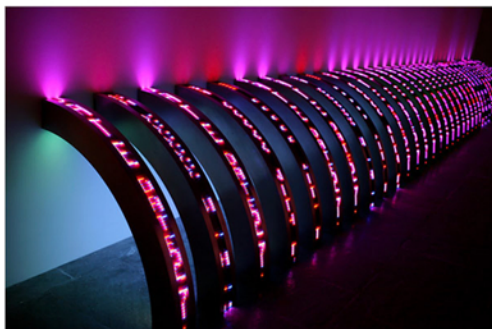


Sounding the Alarm, in Words and Light



“Purple 2008” by Jenny Holzer states reports of torture, from the victims, perpetrators and observers.

Cont.- encouraging us to appreciate their increased visual complexity. (Such spaciousness is becoming something of a Whitney house style; it is equally effective on the two floors of works from the collection below the Holzer show.) Some pieces climb the wall in curved, repeating bands of LED that jut out like Donald Judd’s stacks. Others are straight but sandwiched between walls like Dan Flavin’s fluorescent tubes.

The pieces can be read from different angles, especially since most of them use double-sided LED signs. More intricate programming allows new tricks: the words jump, change shape and are interrupted by patterns or solid color, or slip past in double layers. Even when Ms. Holzer is recycling earlier writing, as she does in “Monument” and in “Green Purple Cross” and “Blue Cross” (which are shown combined, spanning a corner), enjoyment and meaning collide more violently; comprehension is slowed, and the words take on new weight.

But above all, the exhibition demonstrates that as the times have caught up with Ms. Holzer, she has turned from poetic soothsaying to simply reporting the facts. Her newest LED pieces, as well as the silkscreen paintings she started making in 2005, have a single source: declassified and redacted government documents concerning Iraq and the Middle East.

Ms. Holzer’s Warholian silkscreen paintings are mostly stark blow-ups of these documents. They can be heart-

rending confessions or letters from prisoners of all kinds and their families (parents pleading that the Army discharge rather than court-martial their sons); autopsy and interrogation reports; or exchanges concerning torture, as well as prisoners’ handprints and maps of Baghdad. All are to some extent redacted, blacked out with a censor’s marker, which gives them unexpected interest as found drawings. These works could be accused of exploiting personal tragedy, but they also make starkly clear the shat-

The New York Times, always been Ms. Holzer’s primary subject.

The texts in the paintings come at us from many points of view, with all degrees of emotion or officialness; they reiterate in real life the multiple voices of Ms. Holzer’s writings. The changing viewpoints in turn are mimicked in the way we re-encounter the same language in different forms. The words in “Purple” mostly echo the paintings, but seem even scarier spelled out on curved LED signs that arc from floor to wall, like some kind of highly efficient machine.

The flashing words in “Thorax” repeatedly focus on a single incident — the death of a civilian driver in Baghdad — again from different points of view. As is usually the case here, the truth is elusive, but the facts of pain and death are solid.

The most complex piece both visually and linguistically is “Red Yellow Looming,” in which 13 LED signs form a kind of stairway between parallel walls (tanother Flavin composition). Words, codes and numbers, mostly from State Department dispatches, move across the signs; all pertain in some way to the

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current war in Iraq, but some date back to the Reagan administration.

This may be the most beautiful yet most sinister piece Ms. Holzer has made; reading even a little of it is like watching something start to go down the drain while being strangled in red tape.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Foundation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland, this show was overseen by Elizabeth A. T. Smith, curator at the Chicago museum, and Sam Keller, the Beyeler’s director. It confirms that Ms. Holzer has always been bent on seducing us into seeing the darker side of things. There is a strictness and narrowness to her art that may be easier to respect than to love. But in many ways she has met — at least for the moment — the basic requirements of artistic importance. Her work is singular, consistent and relevant. It has developed and has also been influential. It regularly succeeds in taking us deep into the machinations of human frailty and power.

“Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect” continues through May 31 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.

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