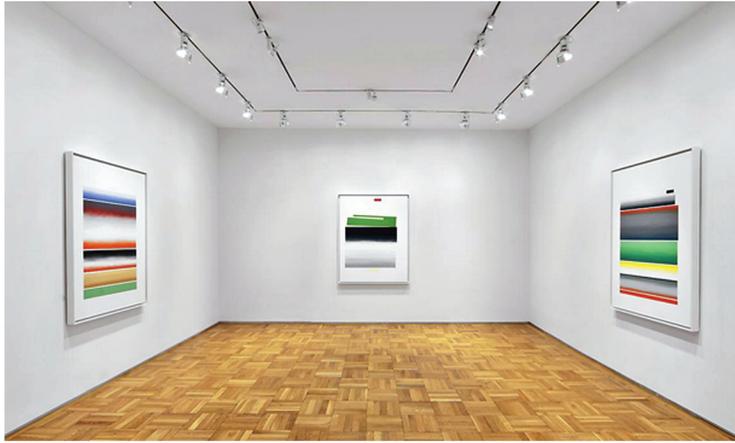


## BLOUINARTINFO



### ***Jenny Holzer Returns to Painting, Making a Case for Abstraction in a Post-WikiLeaks World***

By Chloe Wyma - April 3, 2012

Thirty years ago, Jenny Holzer aspired to become an abstract painter in the vein of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Instead, she became postmodernism's Confucian language poet, famous for her pithy, wise, and sometimes-deviant one-liners scrawled on LED signs, billboards, plaques, benches, and T-shirts. Now, in a surprising about-face, the text-based artist has returned to painting with "Endgame," her new show at Skarstedt Gallery on the Upper East Side. Without either impeaching painting or naively positing it as a magic bullet, Holzer insinuates herself in the broken framework of modernist painting, showing us what politically-engaged abstraction might look like in a post-WikiLeaks world.

Elaborating on her 2006 series of silkscreened copies of military and intelligence documents, her linen paintings incorporate censored government documents, combining gestures borrowed from abstract painting with snippets of declassified text describing the United States government's controversial practices of detention, interrogation, and — many would say — torture of terrorism suspects. Like much hard-hitting political art, Holzer's paintings are hard to digest and easy to turn away from cynically. In his review of the Skarstedt show, the New York Times's Ken Johnson framed the exhibition as an obsolete finger-wagging sermon against visual pleasure: "The effectiveness of Holzer's indictment of aesthetics-first art depends on survivor guilt," he wrote. "It is hard to enjoy fine art in a fancy gallery when you are reminded that people are suffering elsewhere."

Yet Johnson's take on Holzer's paintings is perversely reductive. Far from accusing "nonrepresentational painting of covering up and blinding artists and viewers to real-world problems," as Johnson would have it, her "Endgame" show is a measured and complex thesis on the fraught relationship between painting and politics. The paintings are built on a parallel: Holzer pairs the vocabulary of abstract painting with the authoritative and dispassionate language of classified counter-terrorism documents, a language that — in its implacable bureaucratic logic — turns torture and violence into abstractions.

The first floor, dominated by Serape-colored gradients of red, green, and canary yellow, comes across as insidiously cheerful. Polychrome rectangles compete with snippets of text describing interrogation and detention practices. One reads: “new detainees are to have a thorough medical assessment upon arrival at the first agency detention facility.” Another obliges the viewer to “consider whether the use of these techniques would inflict severe mental pain or suffering.” Upstairs, Holzer shifts visual gears, abandoning painterly color fields for unmodulated, hard-edge geometry. Numerous black-on-white paintings nod to Kazimir Malevich as they cry censorship. In “Endgame Black,” all the text has been blacked-out, save for the word “Endgame,” looming portentously in all caps three quarters down the canvas. As corrolaries to the blacked-out works, several other canvasses are thinly covered in diaphanous white primer, ghostly palimpsests revealing greyish shadows of redacted text underneath.

At the same time that they reframe such sinister texts, the various works in “Endgame” also offer a kind of illustrated guide through the history of Modernist painting. There are nods to Malevich’s jaunty rectangles, Ryman’s ghostly white monochromes, Reinhardt’s velvety blacks, and Rothko’s graduated color passages. Johnson argues that these amount to disingenuous parodies, yet the title of the show suggests something else. It refers, I’d guess, to the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art’s 1986 painting survey, which bore the same Beckett-inspired name. The catalogue for that exhibition had critic Yve-Alain Bois posit that the hysterically teleological vector of Modernist painting had always pointed towards its own demise. In this light, Holzer’s pairing of utopian abstraction and dystopian reality isn’t — as Johnson suggests — some elaborate guilt trip aimed at art lovers, but a solemn inventory of modernist painting that makes explicit the death fixation that was always there already.