

# john phillip abbott

## NEW DAY

11 January - 15 February 2020

Opening on Saturday 11 January from 3pm to 8pm



John Phillip Abbott, *Superweek*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 168 x 158 cm. © John Phillip Abbott. Courtesy of the artist and Xippas.

To begin the year on an optimistic note, Xippas Paris is pleased to announce *New Day*, John Phillip Abbott's first solo show at the gallery, reuniting on both floors of the exhibition space a body of works carried out since 2012 and his most recent productions.

Since his debut, John Phillip Abbott explores the relationship between text and image, blurring the boundary between both. Words, names or short sentences organize his compositions with a grid-like structure and function as images rather than mere concepts. Complex and visually intense, his linguistic structures challenge legibility and invite the viewer to enter an interstitial zone, between "reading" and "seeing".

Each lexical entity chosen by Abbott for his painting presents itself as a problem or a puzzle. The starting point is the word itself and its diastrophic value, as it refers to his past experiences

and memories. For example *Pontiac* was his first car. *In the Pines*, the song by Huddie Ledbetter, he grew up with and often listened to while painting. *Phaedrus* is a character in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig. As for the tennis paintings, they are reminiscent of yet another important book from his past, entitled *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey. This book, largely centered on being in the moment, made him reflect on sport as a metaphor for art and life and consider the process of art making as a form of cathartic exercising, physically engaging his body while painting and challenging his mind, in search of memories and associated words.

John Phillip Abbott's creative process starts with a memory, crystallized in words. After the lexical content (dug up from his personal history) is determined and stabilized, comes the act of painting, which consists in spelling out words or short sentences, through a peculiar calligraphic vocabulary composed of geometric shapes (stripes, rectangles, diamonds, pyramids, etc.). These shapes, interweaving with words' usual configuration, are carefully chosen as part of formal solutions to the painterly problems and situations he encounters. The act of transformation – the one that puts words in disguise and makes grids out of letters – is thus purely formal and detached from the initial semantic load. In this sense, Abbott is close to the Support/Surface movement, considering formal research to be primordial in his work. He doesn't consider words as concepts, but rather adopts a sensuous approach towards them – like canvas or paint, words are to be felt, manipulated, experienced

The actual process of painting for Abbott may be seen as a journey of gradual detachment from the meaning of the word. Or, put differently, his creative process is a passage: from "reading" to "seeing". Once completed, the viewer will be invited to follow the same path, only backwards, from "seeing" to "reading". What will be read remains enigmatic due to the autobiographical nature of the words. However, sufficiently ambiguous, the paintings do not close in upon themselves,

but rather stay open for possible interpretations. As a result, through Abbott's visual formulas, the viewer may be reminded of his past or invent a brand new story.

With this balancing between "reading" and "seeing", between memories put into words and a certain detachment from the words' initial meaning, Abbott's paintings enclose a paradox. On the one hand, we are confronted with the rational approach of a formal painterly research (dictated by geometry, logic or necessity). On the other hand, there is always a sentimental backstory determining the actual choice of words and formal decisions. All this turns Abbott's paintings into something similar to Proust's madeleine or a time-travel machine, destined to resurrect the past.

Calligraphic experimentations and time-travels are, however, not his only preoccupations. John Phillip Abbott endlessly experiments with technique as well. He combines brush strokes and spray painting, uses stencil and masking tape, works on raw or prepared canvases (and sometimes even transforms T-Shirts into a canvas). The artist is constantly inventing and reinventing his way of working and thinking about painting. He listens to materials and stays open to possible surprises, welcoming deformities and embracing imperfections. This is

even more true of his newest paintings presented in the upper gallery. In this body of work, he starts to paint on the unstretched canvas, covering it with dots or stripes, then, stretches it up in order to proceed with the usual word construction. The work on the unstretched canvas gives space to more painterly accidents and unexpected twists, which is why he refers to the moment of stretching the canvas as serendipitous. As if to remind us, that despite the unknown premises and all kinds of surprises waiting ahead, there is always place for an intuition (some call it hope), which makes us believe that a new day shall come, and it will be pretty amazing.

John Phillip Abbott (born in 1975) lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. He received his MFA from the University of Wisconsin in 2007 and a BFA from Western New Mexico University. His work has been shown internationally and most recently at Gleichapel, Paris; COUNTY Gallery, Palm Beach, FL; Galerie Bertrand in Geneva, Switzerland; Pierogi, New York and Devening Projects, Chicago. Abbott was also included in institutional shows such as This One's Optimistic: Pincusion at the New Britain Museum of American Art in New Britain, CT, curated by Cary Smith.

#### PRESS CONTACT

Olga Ogorodova  
press@xippas.com  
+33 1 40 27 05 55

#### XIPPAS PARIS

108 rue Vieille du Temple 75003 Paris  
paris@xippas.com [www.xippas.com](http://www.xippas.com)  
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