

## Kay Rosen's Writing on the Wall

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By Louis Bury

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Kay Rosen, "White House v America" (2018), paint on wall, dimensions variable (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2018 Kay Rosen/Artists Rights Society, New York)

For her first exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates, *Stirring Wirlds*, Kay Rosen directs her customary verbal and visual wit toward America's tense post-Trump political condition. In the past, this wordplay, while often political in nature, equally expressed her delight in language for its own sake. In contrast, the works in *Stirring Wirlds* — almost all of them produced after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election — smiles only to show a bit more fang.

The show's centerpiece, "White House v. America" (2018), sets the tone in this regard. The gargantuan wall painting, which confronts visitors as they ascend the staircase to the gallery's second-floor exhibition space, depicts the letters "WH v AM," with the capitals rendered in bright, Republican red. The contraction of the words "White House" and "America" into two-letter acronyms that spell out a new word when placed side-by-side is characteristic of Rosen's wordplay, but little else is playful about the painting. Its scale, composition, color, and message convey a sense of combative urgency.

The dozen or so smaller paintings in the show, most done in acryla gouache on watercolor paper, manifest a sense of tension between bluntness of message and subtlety of means. In "The Big Pig Picture" (2017), for example, Rosen overlays different shades of pink upon stencil lettering to draw attention to the formal similarities of the letters P and B, and G and C. The work can be read variously as "Big Picture," "Pig Picture," "Big *Picture*" or "Pig *Picture*." The painting's punning message seethes with barely restrained anger that exceeds Rosen's normal expressive range. Even its materials and composition feel in quiet conflict with one another: the letters' stenciled rigidity contrasts with their uneven coloration, as well as with the watercolor paper's gauziness.



Kay Rosen, "The Big Pig Picture" (2017), acryla gouache on watercolor paper, 22 x 16 inches

To be sure, Rosen's work has always traded on linguistic subtleties and tensions. What this exhibition makes apparent, given its thematic focus, is its affinity with the visual idiom of protest, which relies more on wordplay than imagery. By virtue of their scale and high visibility, Rosen's wall and billboard paintings tend to garner more attention than her smaller-scale paintings and drawings, yet the snappy and defiant tone of her work would suit a protest poster in a way that the work of many prominent text-based artists with whom she is compared (for instance, Jenny Holzer, Ed Ruscha, and Mel Bochner) would not. The time is more right than ever for the work Rosen has been making all along.

At the same time, for all its clever ire — as in the word "SIOUX" with the "IOU" set off in a different color ("IOU," 2017) — *Stirring Words* also shows that protest rhetoric can feel toothless when unyoked from action. Nowhere is this clearer than in "Triumph Over Trump (Blue Over Yellow)" (2017), whose yellow-greening of the "TRUMP" alongside a sky-blue "I" and "H" conveys the opposite of what its title proclaims: "TRUMP" dominates the composition. The painting unwittingly suggests that triumphing over Trump is not possible with language alone. For decades, Rosen has honed her compelling and politically barbed visual vocabulary. It's a call to action that, however stirring in its own right, requires the fight to continue on other fronts as well.

Kay Rosen: *Stirring Words* ends at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26th Street, Chelsea,



Kay Rosen, "IOU" (2017), flash paint and acrylic gouache on canvas,  
8 x 10 inches

Kay Rosen: Stirring Wirds ends at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) today.