

# frieze

## GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK, USA

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (1985) neurologist Oliver Sacks describes a case in which he studied the reaction of patients with aphasia and agnosia to a televised address by the late 'Great Communicator' Ronald Reagan. Unable, owing to their brain disorders to process the president's words, but acutely attuned to the phony intonation and affected cadence of his voice, the aphasiacs collapsed with mirth. Conversely, an agnosiac patient, keyed-in to the speech but not its delivery, commented blankly that Reagan 'didn't speak good prose'.

Christopher Knowles' typed work on paper *Untitled* (Ronald Reagan's Budget) (c.1983) simply enumerates an amount of money so unfathomably immense even now (two trillion dollars) that it remains abstract even when committed to the page. This humble sheet somehow lies at the crux of this show, curated by Matthew Higgs, which like a compound Sacks patient is hypersensitive to both the colour and physicality of language, and has a piquant political savvy. Knowles' peculiar plastic management of words is the consequence of neurological damage he sustained before birth, which led to a form of autism. A self-taped recording of his speech-poems brought him, as a teenager in 1973, to the attention of the theatre and opera director Robert Wilson, and he has acted in and contributed dialogue to many performances since then. But save for a suite of paintings related to Wilson's *Parzival* (1987), in which he took the lead role, this show focuses on his off-stage activities as a painter, draughtsman and typist.

Standard white stationery and long sheets of rice paper become settings for typed pictograms of alarm clocks, a window, a space needle and chequerboard patterns, all made up of accumulations of the letter 'C', Knowles' first initial. The selection of his 'typings' here shows a preoccupation with repetition, permutation and seriality – qualities so dear to classic Minimalist art. Indeed *Untitled* (Black and Red Grids) (2004) bears a conspicuous resemblance to Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, and like Knowles, Carl Andre has also produced a body of Concrete poetry using a typewriter. Yet Knowles' favoured formats in these typed works are music charts, where titles and careers are restacked and resculpted in permutations according to popular or personal whim. There are several such favourites lists, including the 35 foot long *Untitled* (Top 3000 of Rock and Roll) (c.1981–2), presented partially unrolled in a vitrine.

But the most intriguing works are those that overlay his delegation of letters as pictures or visual librettos with operations that have a chromatic logic. Latent in the binary black-red ribbon of his typewriter – red being the secretary's typographical last resort and only alternative colour – Knowles' illustration of the capricious nature of decision-making becomes increasingly synaesthetic and political. In two works from 1985 referred to as *Untitled* (Paper Sculpture), hundreds of cut coloured-paper shapes – octagons in one work, crosses in the other – are laid out in grids on two low plinths as if in preparation for a board game. Like brightly coloured xylophones and kiddie keyboards, both arrangements conjure up musical associations. The grid of crosses is a simple rainbow scale, while the octagon version unfolds like a piano roll, with colourful, harmonic flourishes positioned in flushes and runs.

Untitled (Al Gore, George W. Bush) (2000) serves as a reminder of how colour choice can also service power. Gore in Democratic red and Bush in Republican blue – labelled ‘lost’ and ‘won’ accordingly – stare glumly from two canvases. Two political stooges with almost identically lumpy coifs, dotted nostrils and zipper mouths, their faces are like hopelessly vague police-artist photo-fit renderings. Knowles plays out the 2000 presidential elections as a matter of colour-coded marketing, and despite the various shades of grey that marked the Bush team’s shenanigans in the electoral process, the eventual result is plain to see, painted in patriotic red, white and blue. ‘You know what a creep means, don’t you?’ taunts Knowles in one of his typings.

Yet the show’s tracking of ‘chromopolitics’ is at its most pointed in a series of five canvases of increasing size depicting the Department of Homeland Security’s Threat Advisory System, with its notorious colour-coded danger levels ascending from ‘Low’ (green) to ‘Severe’ (red). Untitled (Alert Paintings) (2004) visualizes this attempt to quantify and quarantine the threat of terrorism as an exercise in hysterical abstraction. Knowles’ unique understanding of visual grammar finds its climax in this indictment of the Bush administration’s management of fear under the farcical banner of a candy-coloured pop chart.

Max Andrews