

**Robert Ruello: *Angry Garden Salad***

If this past year has been anything, it has been ripe for contemplation and introspection. We've hunkered down in our homes, watching the world face the realities of Covid 19, racism, our mortality, solitude and silence, and our complicity. Although Robert Ruello's latest exhibition *Angry Garden Salad* is not specifically *about* the current state of our world, it is impossible to experience this work without feeling the weight of the world in it.

*Angry Garden Salad* is a subtle yet staunch departure from Ruello's previous work. It follows the same modus operandi he normally employs in that he uses technology as a starting point, deconstructing it into a set of formal, painterly engagements. However, this grouping feels vastly more contemplative, introverted, stark, saturated, and quietly gut-wrenching. Also of note: the pieces may be quieter, but they're curiously as, if not more, loquacious than ever before. But the chatter is more self-directed and internally devoted this time—more of a mutter—shards of text and fractured information churning in on itself to the point of oblivion.

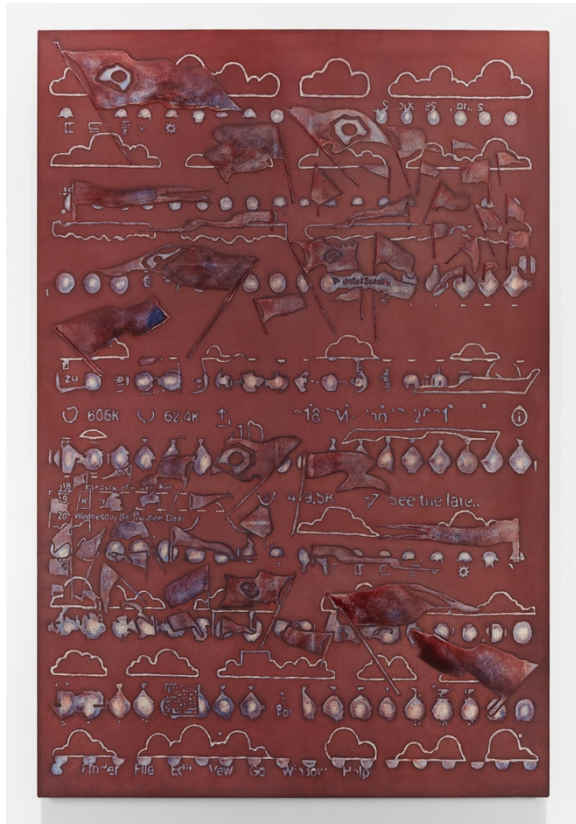


Robert Ruello, *A Sudden Gust*, 2021  
 Flashe and acrylic on canvas  
 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 in (213.4 x 152.4 x 3.8 cm)

This simultaneity of creation and destruction has been omnipresent in Ruello's work: he's always explored the deconstructing of a digital image and reifying it into a formally dynamic object. This time, however, Ruello's oblitative impulse is more multi-directional, its tendrils feeling more precarious and pervasive. With *Angry Garden Salad*, Ruello's classic push/pull extends beyond the technological into a garbled, sensorial conversation between modernism and postmodernism, between language as a carrier of content versus an oblitative tool for formal play and discovery.

Works like *A Sudden Gust* and *Artifact: Blue Screen* (both 2021) harbor a Rothko-esque level of saturation within their canvases. While much flatter, Ruello does employ similar layering and depth, infusing the paintings with an opacity that somehow feels deadened, yet pulsating with force by layering it with deadpan, reflective, evasive mark-making on top. Using acrylic medium as a kind of relief as well as a drawing mechanism, he disrupts their meditative surfaces with indecipherable glyphs, interrupting the conversation with the kind of cacophonous chatter and information overload that is now ingrained into our daily lives.

These glyphs show us a marked turn in Ruello's work, a preference for the all-over mark making evocative of the Abstract Expressionists over the more cohesive, semi-figural abstractions he has been known for in the past. His penchant for the linguistic is nothing new: he has been employing what reads as a type of binary, SOS dot system for years. What differs now is the degree in which Ruello manipulates the surface plane for the sake of formal dynamism; these works read much more so as semiotic devices than linguistic play as a formalist tool. It is important that the works in *Angry Garden Salad* are talking, and doing so emphatically and voraciously.



Robert Ruello, *Artifact: Changing the Wind*, 2021  
 Flashe and acrylic on canvas  
 71 5/8 x 48 x 1 1/2 in (181.9 x 121.9 x 3.8 cm)

This isn't to say that Ruello has abandoned all manipulation of the surface. While much more subtle, there are still many moments of him playing with perspective, and we see this most clearly with *Artifact: Capitol Hill Storm* (2021). But, whereas this kind of use of perspective felt playful and dynamic in exhibitions past, here it feels eerie and disorienting.

In another new move, Ruello incorporates (somewhat) legible text which is present in much of the work, but most pronounced in *Artifact: Changing the Wind* (2021). But it becomes apparent quickly that we are to be suspicious of its content in its deterioration and deconstruction, and rather acknowledge and consider its formalist properties.

With that being said, even amidst all this heaviness it is important to note that Ruello hasn't abandoned his signature sense of play and borderline self-deprecation. Again in *Artifact: Changing the Wind* we are able to pore over moments of delightful poolings of watered-down

acrylic atop the sheen of acrylic medium, performing more like watercolor than acrylic. The term *Angry Garden Salad* is a self-deprecatory IT reference about poorly coded websites. All of the work, while abstracted, refers to Ruello's internal life and website search history, acting as artifacts and bearing witness to his curiosity about, say, the Capitol Hill riots or a saag paneer recipe. The job of Robert Ruello's work is not to pass judgement or make assertions, but to simply reflect back, to reconcile the complexities of our world exactly as they are.

--Betsy Huete , May 2021