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Kay Rosen, *White House v. America*, 2018, acrylic on wall, dimensions variable. © Kay Rosen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Kay Rosen

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That politics should have been on Kay Rosen's mind in preparing this show, "Stirring Wirds," is in tune with the tenor of her work for some decades past—politics are a habit of mind for her. But the times of Donald Trump have given her special urgency. Of course, I thought the same thing a dozen years ago about the times of George W. Bush, when Rosen produced acute responses to the fate of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. When something bad happens, we sometimes console ourselves by saying, "Could be worse." Given recent trajectories, though, this may not be such a reassuring idea.

Rosen is a visual artist who takes a crossword puzzler's pleasure in puns, anagrams, and other kinds of wordplay both familiar and self-invented. She is hardly the first artist to make verbal language her material—that enterprise goes back at least to Marcel Duchamp and is the stuff of Conceptual art. But Rosen's particular interest is the overlap between language and sight: By messing with the way words and letters appear, she denaturalizes the way we decode them. Her work is always at least somewhat playful, probably inescapably so given its echoes of riddles and tongue twisters, but its wit mixes with gravity, explicitly in its content and perhaps more deeply and less obviously in its underlying implication.

The way Rosen wrenches language into giving up its meanings is sometimes self-evident, as in the mural *Trickledown*, 2016/2018, which sets the word TRICK in a horizontal line above a vertical one: the rest of the title word, broken apart and dribbling letter by letter down the wall. Should you have wondered how much Rosen trusts in the principles of trickle-down economics, now you know. In other works, the title helps. *White House v. America*, 2018, is another, larger mural: The centerpiece of the show, it filled a gallery-length wall with the word WHAM, in giant red letters divided in the middle by a little black v. You would probably have gotten to this eventually, but having the title explain that the first two letters of WHAM refer to *White House* and the last two to *America* made the meaning immediately clear.

The choice of whether or not to call on the title for help finds subtler expression in *Triumph over Trump (Blue over Yellow)*, 2017, a work in acrylic gouache on paper in which the word TRUMP, in green letters, has been changed to TRIUMPH by the addition of an I and an H in blue. The work's subtitle, though, suggests that Rosen first painted the letters of trump in yellow, then transformed them into green by going over them with the same translucent blue that has given us the i and the h. That suggestion was reinforced by the washiness of the gouache, denser and darker green in some places and thinner—yellowish—in others. Viewers can associate blue with the Democrats, and green and yellow with various unattractive personality traits; that Trump should be both of the latter colors at the same time comes as no surprise, but is rarely so concisely expressed. At the same time, the work returns us to the



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visual nature of Rosen's art, the way it combines a linguistic sensibility with a painter's understanding of how two colors will merge. And let's not forget social awareness: Rosen is also playing with the cultural meanings of blue, yellow, and green—word, world, and vision all mixing in the viewer's mind.

And this, I think, is what I most relish about Rosen's art, what I called above its underlying implication: its recognition that given the way we think, none of these things can be separated. The idea of the pure artwork is remote here; instead, Rosen is interested in the liminal, in crossovers and conversions, transitions and transfers, the words hidden within other words, the meanings that leak out, the things we say as well as or instead of the things we mean to say. The wonder is that when it comes to her opinion of Donald Trump, she is nevertheless crystal clear.

—*David Frankel*