



Carris Adams: *Double-talk*
May 11 - June 22, 2019

Carris Adams: *Double-talk* by Claudine Isé

During afternoon and evening rush hours, the fastest route between Goldfinch's location in East Garfield Park and my home in Oak Park is Lake Street, which runs directly underneath the elevated Green Line tracks and parallels the Eisenhower Expressway. More often than not, I wind up taking Lake. It started as a way to shave ten or more minutes off my commute, but during the course of preparing for Carris Adams' exhibition *Double-talk* I found myself choosing Lake regardless of traffic conditions. In response to Adams' work, which draws inspiration from the linguistic landscapes of built environments, I began to see store signage, billboards, and other forms of commercial advertisements in an entirely new light, and wanted to take a closer look at a category of object I hadn't paid much attention to before.

The roughly five mile stretch of Lake Street that traverses Garfield Park, Austin and Oak Park proves ideal for this. The types of business you see there are the ones that deal with necessities in one form or another: corner grocery stores, take-out restaurants, auto mechanics, churches, pawn shops, liquor stores. Over time, I developed not just a familiarity with but a fondness for a number of the older, hand-painted or otherwise idiosyncratic shop signs I'd see along my drive. When traffic was really slow, I could take snapshots. Scrolling through these images on my phone now, I'm struck by the repeated use of attention-grabbing color combinations of yellow, black, red and blue. A sign painted on the side of MJ Food Mart on the corner of Lake and Pulaski, for example, employs red, black and blue lettering against a brick wall painted in two shades of yellow—a pale butter background, with brighter, Post-It note yellow squares of paint used to emphasize the fact that they are open "7 days" and offer bread, eggs, milk, pop, and other staples. Across the street, the L&J Liquor sign also uses yellow, black and red, as does the one for West Loop Furniture Depot a few blocks down. A favorite of mine is BABA'S on Lake and Laramie, a restaurant whose name is announced via alternating yellow and blue capital letters, below which appear the words "FAMOUS STEAK & LEMONADE" in blue against a white ground. In red, the word "HALAL" is perched at an angle

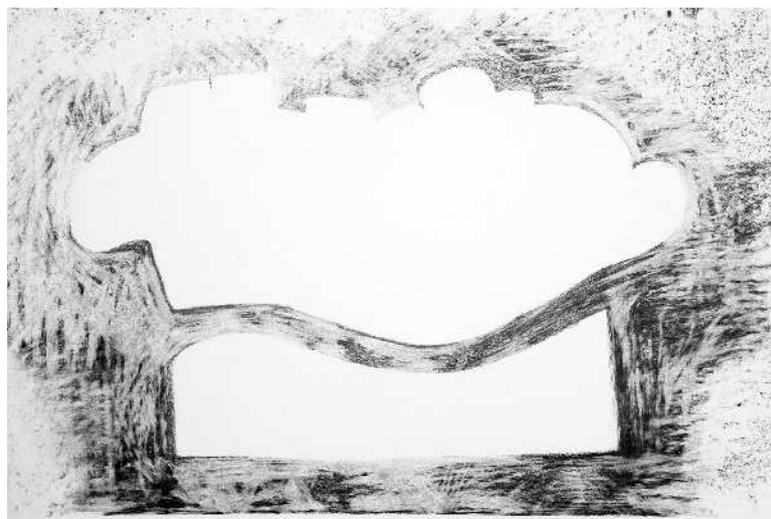


Carris Adams, *Chicken King # 14*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"

atop the right edge of BABA'S like a jauntily tipped hat to indicate that their food is religiously acceptable according to Islamic law. It's a welcoming sign.

Among the most compelling store signs on my route are the degraded ones that have lost the luster they presumably once had. Some of them appear quite literally as shadows of their former selves, like the denim-blue sign for a Farmer's Insurance at Lake and Belmont that's now shuttered. These types of signs speak in a number of ways: discursively, they offer material evidence of a lost opportunity, perhaps also a loss of public access, and certainly of abandoned economic promises on a national, local and/or individual scale. But over time, these faded signs also begin to converse in a language that can only be described as poetic. A particularly poignant example is the sign on the tiny, boarded-up brick building that once housed New Drift Liquors on Lake just a block west of Lockwood. The words "NEW DRIFT" appear as black, sans serif, right-tilting letters over the chipped and discolored yellow bricks of the storefront, while the slightly larger "LIQUORS" stands upright. To my mind, the sign is pure concrete poetry, its success at conveying meaning through its visual form further bolstered by the fact that the anonymous sign painter chose to wrap the letters around two protruding columns, so that from certain angles the store's name appears to be tipsily bumping into or sliding across the building's edifice. The liquor store is long gone, and though the painted sign remains, it too, in a sense, is adrift. Cut loose from its original meaning, New Drift no longer points to anything other than that which isn't there.

I would never have noticed or thought about New Drift Liquors and the other signs I've just described in the way I do now had I not spent time spent looking at and thinking about Adams' paintings and drawings. Adams plucks the language from store signs and advertisements and repurposes it as raw material for her work, but importantly, she never seeks to replicate or otherwise translate these signs in a direct mimetic fashion. Rather, her palimpsestic approach to surface layering and depth, her luscious brushwork, and her peppery lexicon of marks highlight and implicitly celebrate the everyday languages and colloquial practices that Michel de Certeau has labeled "tactics"—small but meaningful actions, gestures, habits and modes of interaction that have the potential to individualize and quietly subvert the uniformity, alienation and inequity inscribed within built environments by top-down city planning and commercial culture, among other monolithic forces. However, I would argue that the group of grey-scale graphite drawings in *Double-talk* differ from Adams' previous, richly chromatic paintings in a number of key ways. Through



Carris Adams, *Untitled*, 2018. Graphite on paper, 30" x 40" (Photo: Jasmine Clark)

combinations of additive and subtractive actions—the repetitive layering and shading of graphite pencil on thick sheets of creamy paper, the rubbing away of dense grey and black areas to create fields of white lines, and the suggestions of words and iconography arising from the voids formed by the absence of the artist's touch—Adams conjures more or less recognizable images out of what is, in essence, empty space.

Then again, is space ever really empty? In many ways, Adams' drawings convey the idea that erasure, removal and absence speak a language of their own. Certainly, a vacated space holds within it the potential for radical change. But more insidious scenarios connote displacement, dislocation, gentrification and eradication. Something is removed, something else is put in its place, or maybe nothing is. Either way, Adams' references to language here read as ironic and somewhat cautionary. When we look at these drawings, these expressive redactions, what do we see? The persistent traces, histories, and personal memories of real places that no longer exist? Or are we looking instead at an illusion, the manifestation of a desire to carve out and colonize those spaces by sequestering all of the marks, textures and shadings that complicate the picture we seek to create? By flipping positive space into negative space and back, over and over again, the works in *Double-talk* neatly reveal the conundrums of language that allow both of these possibilities to be true.



Carris Adams, Untitled, 2018. Graphite on paper, 30" x 40" (Photo: Jasmine Clark)

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*Front Cover: Carris Adams, Untitled, 2018. Graphite on paper, 30" x 40" (Photo: Jasmine Clark)

Exhibition Dates:
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Design by Nicole Gardner