



The *Word* and the *Light*

By [C.J. Janovy](#)

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Archie Scott Gobber understands that in this time, at this moment, no five letters in the English alphabet, arranged in this order, provoke the same anxieties as these: PALIN.

So he paints them in a sickly pale-green, gives them an orange third dimension, and sets them in a quavery block of rich-sod brown, all of it against a chipboard background that looks like the battered cardboard of a [U-Haul](#) box or the soft leather of a frontier holster. And he adds an apostrophe in the top-right corner of the *N* to make it read: PALIN'.

The apostrophe is a wink, a sly and unnecessary confirmation that yes, he means the 2008 vice presidential candidate known for her distinctive way of talkin'. But it's also a punch in the gut. **Gobber** paints the punctuation as a tiny hard square with a sharply pointed descender. It's not the rounded apostrophe of softer fonts but, rather, an argument that as the unintelligible former Alaska governor ascends, the American intellect fades.

It's no coincidence, either, that on the opposite wall of this gallery hangs a piece proclaiming, "TALENTLESS is the new TALENTED."

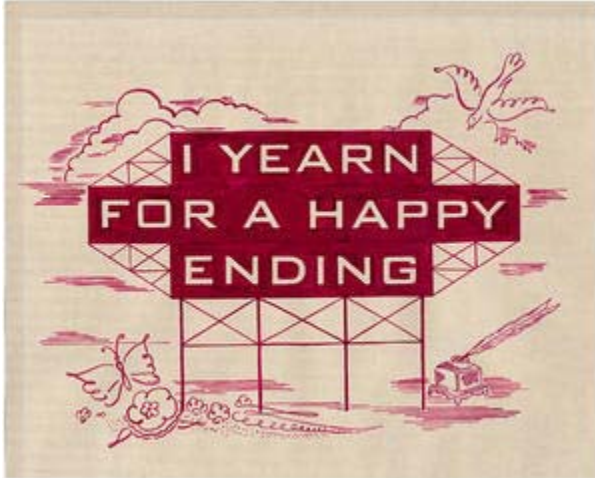
Gobber's work has its own room in the [Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art's](#) *Word* exhibition; next door, as part of the same show, hangs work by fellow Kansas Citians Christopher Leitch and [Jim Sajovic](#). [Leitch](#) has done a temporary wall installation, writing "you are what you hate ..." left-handed, and again right-handed, and then with his eyes closed, each effort partly on top of the previous one, the pencil lines coursing nonsensically across an otherwise empty white wall. Sometimes the spaces within pencil lines are filled in with a standard red, blue, yellow, purple, green, black or orange, the occasional bright colors scattered like almost-cleaned-up confetti.

Sajovic imposes disturbing phrases by former [Kansas City Art Institute](#) professor [Harvey Hix](#) — "I may kill. You should know this about me. A razor in the night without warning" — over acrylic portraits of vaguely familiar faces. A woman looks a little like like a young [Ellen Burstyn](#), and a white-haired man resembles some friendly father, except for his freaky, unnatural blue eyes piercing out from behind the threatening text. In other paintings, longer phrases spelled out in letters of different colors and sizes cover blurrier but more iconic-feeling faces (a shadowy man in a flat-brimmed hat); the impulse is to try to read what the text is saying, but it's too disconcerting with the hazy faces staring back from underneath. It's not unlike [Twitter](#): a mind-scattering cacophony of competing messages.

In a separate room is *Light Text* by New York artist [Hank Willis Thomas](#). In Thomas' darkened room, visitors can relax on the soft leather bench with the comfortable back, and be assured by the bluish-white neon phrase: "It's everywhere you want to be/The life you were meant to live." But wait, now different words within that sign are lighting up in combinations that are saying something different: "It's everywhere." The dreaded *it!* "You meant to live." But now it feels too late!

The assault going on around **Gobber's** pieces makes them all the more engaging. In his gallery, it's possible to feel how the words "Will You Marry Me" have been corrupted by politics. Rendered in fading, all-American red and blue, with texture that evokes the pride on a letterman's jacket, the words only remind us

that all couples are not created equal, that some people don't get to hear the question — or if they do, it's layered with imaginary asterisks: *We'll have to have the wedding in another state, of course, and some of the relatives probably won't come, and it won't be legal once we get back home to the house we already own, on which we pay our fair share of taxes.*



Archie Scott Gobber's *"I Yearn for a Happy Ending"*

The first image in this gallery is a small painting with the words "Abandon Hope" atop scaffolding in a deserted landscape. The last image could be an old-time greeting card: Christmas-red butterflies and doves surround the phrase "I yearn for a happy ending."

We all do, but there's no such luck.

Archie Scott Gobber, Christopher Leitch, Jim Sajovic: *Word*

Hank Willis Thomas: *Light Text*

Through November 20 at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Boulevard, Overland Park, 913-469-2348.