

Samuel Jablon
by Kayode Ojo

I probably met the painter and poet Samuel Jablon while attending a Team Gallery opening in New York City around 2016. I'm sure I would have gravitated to him for his beguiling tincture of roughness and sensitivity. A gentleman among sharks, he is a cozy fellow—one of my weaknesses.

Over the years, we've spoken at length about what it means to be an artist. But what we're really talking about is what it means to insist on continuing to be observant and creative in the face of the complicated opposition to our shared venture—an adventure, which I feel is rooted in a stubbornness fueled by optimism. This time we recorded it.

opposite: *Baby Liess*,
2021, oil on canvas, 90 x
80 inches. Images cour-tesy
of the artist and Morgan
Presents, New York.





left: *Kcuf*, 2021, oil on canvas, 72 x 64 inches.

sent a gallery several of the *Fuck* paintings in 2020, and they were like, “These are all titled *Kcuf*, 2020?” And I said, “Yes.”

KO: To me, *Bad Bad Bad* looks like an anxiety painting. Almost like a dirty window. Is it raining outside? But then, the one that says “NOTHING BAD HAPPENS” is like a daily affirmation. I don’t know what you call this blue; it almost looks like neon to me. It’s a very large painting.

SJ: That painting is 72 by 90 inches. The paintings and text come out of anxiety.

KO: It’s a commitment saying “NOTHING BAD HAPPENS” this large.

SJ: It takes over the space with this optimistic phrase, but there’s also an underlying criticality happening. Bad things are constantly happening. I started writing phrases that were too good to be true; “NOTHING BAD HAPPENS” was one of them. Horrible and challenging things kept occurring to me, to the world, to people I know. The phrases became a sort of mantra. It’s like the *Titanic* is sinking and someone is still playing music.

KO: Whereas this one, NO BAD DAYS, could be seen as more cynical, maybe because it’s much smaller. It has a lot of red. It seems angry, like (*shouts*) “No bad days!” It becomes almost militaristic.

SJ: I’m very interested in the line between cynicism and optimism. Lies are important. “NOTHING BAD HAPPENS” is a flat-out lie. The band plays on when everyone knows the situation is hopeless. There is something magical to that. A level of humanity appears in the worst moment and then disappears. I try to capture a sense of that in my practice—the fragility and magic of existence. The work is rooted in anxiety and erasure so the paintings are built out of the two: I’ll do a manic gesture, and then I’ll come in and erase the entire painting. That becomes one layer. Some paintings are

canvas to sort of forget about them and to move more into the painting. It’s this back and forth between what I’m painting and what I’m reading and how paint and text interact. And lately it’s become more about linework. I’m starting to see my painting as a matter of vertical and horizontal lines. At least that’s where I’m at right now.

KO: So, the colors dictate the way you use the text?

SJ: I’ve noticed that the colors completely change the meaning of the phrases—like the nuances will shift based on the color of the background. I made a series of works that say “FUCK.” People react very differently to each *Fuck* painting depending on the style and color scheme. The tone and meaning become interpreted through how it’s painted.

KO: Yes, I can see that here. I’m looking at one that says “BAD BAD BAD.” Is that also the title?

SJ: Yes, the text is always the title. I



in the studio for more than six months and are erased over and over, and the end result is built out of what was erased.

No Bad Days, for example, is an erased painting; the ground and the colors come from this act of removal. I scrape paint away with cardboard, rags, my hands... pretty much anything within reach. It’s about: What can you get away with? Is it too cheesy or hedonistic? Where is the line there?

KO: We don’t know what’s going on with you in your life. You’ve seen a lot of dark stuff, but you believe in art and have enough confidence to do it.

SJ: Yeah. The first painting I made in January 2020 said “DOOMED.” I thought, “Man, this painting was a little too on point.” (*laughter*)

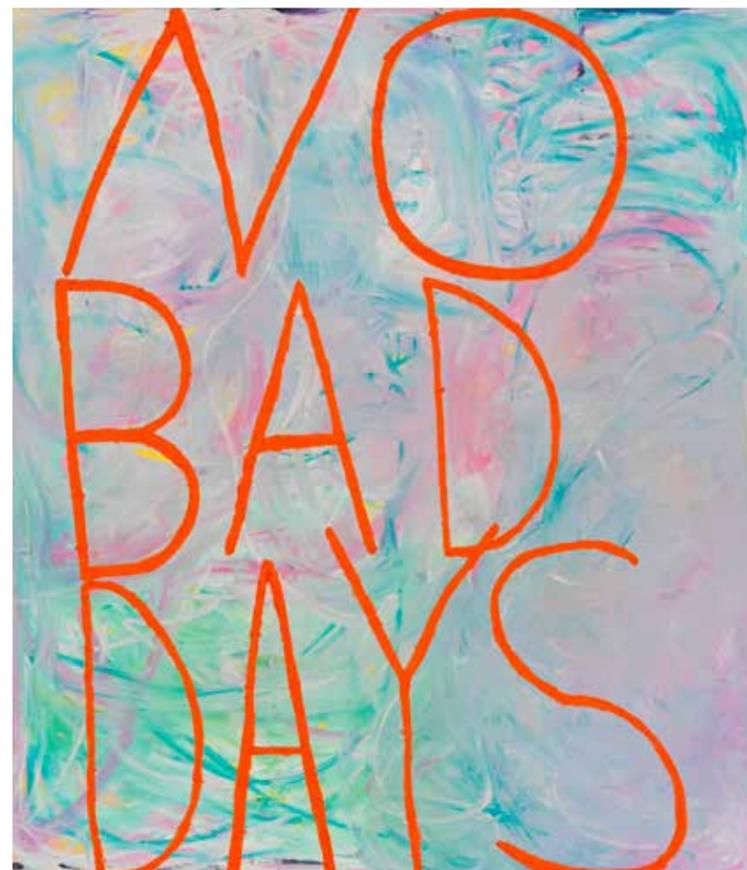
KO: Looking at these works here, I think of Mel Bochner and Christopher Wool’s works with texts. There is a Christopher Wool painting that says “THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER YOU LOOK.” It is, in a way, a double entendre. I think what it’s trying to say is that the closer you look at things, that reflects into you and it can destroy optimism, and then you look hard. You know what I mean? It’s about how the experience of life can make you depressed.

SJ: Bochner is a hard conceptualist. For instance, the BLAH BLAH BLAH paintings—I mean, I love them, but they give you nothing in terms of language. It’s just like, “I’m saying nothing, look at it.” You are looking at it. And Chris Wool pretty much removes, besides the smeary abstractions, anything except the language. So you get stuck with “RUN DOG RUN,” or whatever.

I think in the playfulness there is an optimism. It’s holistic yet sterile. They are both so bold and pronounced, and in your face. Whereas my text work kind of collapses into the painting.

above: *Bad Bad Bad*, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 64 inches.

below: *No Bad Days*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90 x 80 inches.

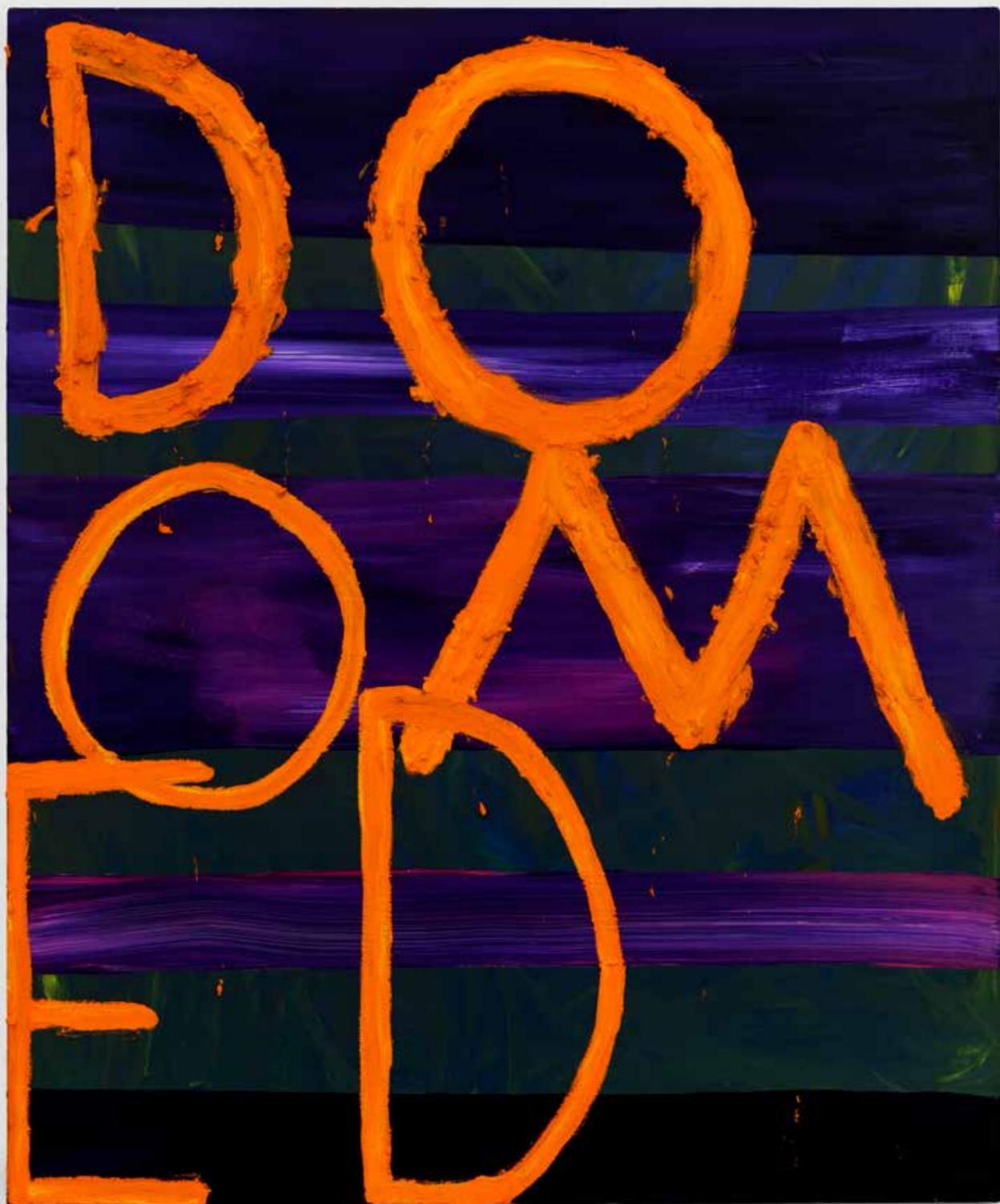


KAYODE OJO: We’re here at Samuel Jablon’s studio in Dumbo to talk about his paintings. Let’s begin with your relationship to text and the way you navigate language.

SAMUEL JABLON: Text comes out of my poetry background. I went to Naropa University, and there I studied with Anne Waldman, Amiri Baraka, and Bob Holman. When I was writing poetry, everything was very visual to me; it was always more visual than literary. In my work, a text was broken down on a single page and sprawled all over. It was rarely left-to-right. My mom is a painter and I was this little kid running around her studio and I was always painting. Some of my first memories are of throwing paint at a wall.

Eventually, I started combining writing and painting. The text almost becomes an architecture for the painting. It builds back into this structure. For instance, this one says “NOTHING BAD HAPPENS.” And it’s a lie, right? But it’s a lie you can tell yourself to move forward. Sometimes I will repeat words or phrases on the

Doomed, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 40 inches.



It's less about the phrasing and more about the painting. I'm always painting against the text. The letters become a structure that divide the canvas. The structure allows me space to explore color, gesture, and mark. When I do a solo show, I think of the whole show as a poem and the viewer walks through the poem in a nonlinear way. So there is always a back and forth between paint and text.

KO: There are people who are more afraid of public speaking than they are of dying, you know? Having an art show in New York City, which is bigger than your birthday, you are basically naked. It's like, "Here I am, judge me." Many people cannot do that.

You're working with text, and you show your work on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where there's a lot of street art.

SJ: Yeah, you have to put yourself out there and take risks. Otherwise, no one will see the work. Responses to my work have been all over the place. I try to not let positive or negative feedback linger in my brain. Both can send you down the wrong path. I just hope it all dissipates and I can focus on the paintings I need and want to make, regardless of what people say or think about them. I have a compulsion to make them.

KO: There are many people who use text in ways that are not interesting. What you are doing with text is ambitious because it asks people to look a little bit longer. If you had your paintings on the street, I don't think people would take selfies next to them.

SJ: No, my paintings are too slow and require time to make and understand. The longer you look at them, the more they reveal. The tension between paint and text falls apart, and the paintings open up as abstractions.

I have always thought of graffiti and street art as someone announcing that the artist is there. "I am here, this is where I live, this is my corner, this is my tag, you are in my neighborhood."

KO: Did you see the dress AOC wore to the Met gala? It had the phrase "TAX THE RICH" on it.

SJ: It's a bit cheesy.

KO: That is bad text art. There is no imagination there.

SJ: That stuff is more like a statement or slogan. There's no mystery.

KO: Yeah, but also the dress could've been better, first of all. (*laughter*) If you say, "Tax the rich," everyone is like, "Yeah, duh." But it takes an immoral standpoint to think you are right and anyone who disagrees is wrong. In our liberal minds, in our liberal world, we can't just disagree with that statement.

SJ: Well, there always is this line. Like when you are doing something with text and art—I guess this is also true with portraiture—you are playing with this world of propaganda, especially if you try to push an idea. I've always been against statements in the work. I don't want the work to be a billboard.

KO: It can become didactic.

SJ: There is propaganda for good causes and propaganda for bad causes. I think propaganda in art tends to limit the possibilities for people to engage. One thing I love are peoples' protest signs. It's the perfect place for statements and slogans, but I wouldn't try to make paintings of them. I've always been drawn to work that makes you question what you are looking at and why. I don't like being told why I'm looking at something and why it's important.

KO: But there are people who just make cursed images. Part of me likes that. (*laughter*) But some of it is also appropriation. Working with text is a form of appropriation. You didn't invent English, you know?

SJ: I didn't.

KO: But your work doesn't protect itself either.

SJ: What do you mean by that?

KO: It's not you trying to be politically correct.

SJ: Yeah, no. If you're being too safe

everything becomes generic and boring. It's better to be mysterious and mischievous. Say what you need to say and let people figure out what you are about on their own.

KO: You can make someone stop and spend the entire day thinking about it, but they don't know why. "Why am I still thinking about this damn painting?" It's not shock-jock, if you know what I mean. The ambiguity actually stays longer than a reaction like "Don't tell me how to feel." Sometimes I say that if I knew what my work was about, I wouldn't make it. The work is what I cannot say.

SJ: There was a moment when I was making abstract paintings, and I just couldn't live with them. I would make a painting and I would be like, What does it say? This painting has no voice. And that was when I started adding poetry and text into them, which gave them more of a conceptual thread, rather than maintaining pure abstraction. But they started building up in this way: this painting says something, but it also says nothing; this line announces itself, but then it sort of dissolves into an abstract painting. Which is why I don't think they could live on the street. They take so long—each painting takes at minimum three months. The number of layers that build up and then get erased, and then the drying and avoiding their turning into mud...it just takes forever.

KO: Yeah, that idea of an overworked painting. The term *overworked* is interesting because it can mean many different things. You were saying how your paintings are slow, how it takes longer to look at them. That is a relationship to abstraction, which I sense when I look at your work. And this is maybe—again, I'm not an expert in painting at all—where the medium is the message. Chris Wool has a way of doing that. And Mel Bochner—

SJ: Well, I find Bochner hard to read.

KO: "Hard to read" is another loaded phrase. If I see one of your paintings in a gallery, it's going to take me a while to figure out what the letters spell. I know that there is text on it, but I get

distracted by the colors, the paint, the texture—many things. But I’ve looked at this longer than I would look at other types of paintings because I am trying to read it. I know it says something, and I can’t immediately read it, so I have to look at it long enough.

SJ: At Brooklyn College, where I got my MFA, I studied under Vito Acconci. It was amazing because he started off as a fiction writer and used writing to move into new fields: from poetry to performance to architecture. He always had this focus as a conceptualist. I have this memory of sitting in the studio with Vito and looking at an abstract painting I made. I remember him saying, “What’s the point of this?” He more or less dismissed it. Once I started combining poetry with the painting, he stood in front of it and said something along the lines of, This really opens things up, but you haven’t gone far enough. I thought, That’s an accomplishment. Although I don’t think the man liked paintings. *(laughter)* But then I started noticing that the more complicated and difficult the language was to read, the longer people would spend looking at my works.

KO: The resistance to painting is about jealousy. If you talk with anyone who doesn’t paint—sculptors, photographers, video artists—if you get that conversation going long enough, you will find jealousy. Abstraction is its own world entirely. I think with figuration, you can measure a painter by their skill. *(laughter)*

SJ: We have a longer history of figuration and you know if the work is good or bad based on skill and training. It’s easier to see someone’s talent. Abstraction is more elusive.

KO: There was a time in New York in the early 2000s when collectors were buying anything, and a lot of people were working in galleries and making a ton of money. And there were many market darlings. Remember Terence Koh, a.k.a. asianpunkboy? There was an article in *New York Magazine*—something like, “Portrait of the artist as a young punk capitalist.” You can still read it online. There was Banks Violette. The art market was a giant.

And then Lehman Brothers collapsed the week I moved here, September 2008.

SJ: The world as we knew it ended. The early 2000s seemed like a moment of risk-taking. I think it opened things up. There was a lot of sculpture, performance, and installation happening, which was followed by zombie formalism. These moments I think react against each other. There’s always one movement trying to kill another movement. In 2009, I was mostly working in galleries. I learned a lot by being at work and at exhibitions every day. It’s a unique experience to spend a month seeing one show.

I was still more of a poet than a painter back then. It was a great time to be a poet because I couldn’t afford a studio or materials. I was hanging out at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church and the Bowery Poetry Club. I was really immersed in going to readings every week, and I would write daily. I always found creative nourishment in poetry, and as a poet your audience is amazing—but it is tiny. Part of me wanted a bigger world, and I found it through painting.

KO: I was speaking with some friends at a dinner once, saying, “Oh God, I cannot imagine having to tell people that I’m a poet.” *(laughter)* But my friend Valerie, who is a sculptor, said, “In making art, what we hope for is poetry.” And then a painter at the table said, “I’m a poet!” It was one of these conversations when I was able to see the optimism among my peers.

SJ: My background is in contemporary American poetry. That was what I was schooled in. I mean, there is no money, there is no market.

KO: It’s like, pure.

SJ: You can’t sell it. If you sell five thousand copies of a book, it’s amazing.

KO: There are people in New York who sell like ten, maybe.

SJ: And they are probably selling it themselves. Poetry is very pure, smart, to the point. Bad poetry is horrendous,

Emit Time, 2021, oil on canvas, 70 x 90 inches.



Dont Panic, 2021, oil on linen, 48 x 44 inches.



and good poetry is amazing.

KO: Good poetry stays in your head.

SJ: It hits you in a way... Like Rene Ricard's poetry is so mean. It just cuts you open. There is a rawness to really good poetry.

KO: He always talks with so much emphasis. Words cut. They do.

SJ: David Robilliard is one poet I am really into lately—especially with the title of his book *Baby Lies Truthfully*. I used part of that title to make a painting. The text says "BABY LIESSSS." I wanted the painting to hiss.

KO: Yes, yes!

SJ: Poets and poetry always act as guides for me. Sometimes when I'm stuck on a painting, I will read poetry, and occasionally I take a word from one poet and combine it with a word from another poet, altering it to create a new text. A lot of my texts are a jumble of what I've overheard on the street, read in books, or seen in advertisements.

When I was a kid, my mom worked at Barnes & Noble and I would have to go there and wait for her to finish her shift. The poetry and art sections were next to each other, and I would be there every day for hours, obsessing over books. The poetry that sticks with me the most is written by the poets who express raw honesty.

KO: I feel like I'm growing down instead of growing up. I've been trying to talk to family more, but one of the things they said to me is that I'm so opinionated. I would tell the truth really hard in the wrong situation. And that's fucked up. People don't do that.

SJ: Mind your manners. I come from a pretty outspoken family, and there's always a bit of family drama in my life so me being a poet and a painter never tops the charts at the dinner table.

KO: But as artists, that is what we do. You point, you poke at something no one wants you to poke at.

SJ: Your work must perplex people. In my mind, it's very fresh. You are playing

your own field, your own voice. There is a clearness to your work that I've always admired. It's crisp and right to the point and in one's face. It is what it is, and people can deal with it or not.

KO: The idea of the sphinx. Ambiguity. But people want to know: Does it say anything, and why? There are tons of rules in our society and if you start breaking them—

SJ: If we don't break the rules, we get stuck in mediocrity.

KO: I think there is something very interesting in the idea of your font and I wonder if you are thinking about typography with the way you slow people down and convey your thoughts.

SJ: It's really just my handwriting. But I like the paintings to have depth, so that it almost looks like you are looking through a window.

KO: Have people ever asked you to take the text out?

SJ: Always. Even in grad school, everyone was like, "Stop doing that. Make it painting or make it a text." Like, make it poetry, or make it performance, or make it painting.

KO: They can go fuck themselves. What is your favorite thing about poetry?

SJ: There is a directness and immediacy to poetry. When you hear a great poet read a poem, it's like, Damn. There is a stillness and quietness to the room after a reading and it's like witnessing raw emotion. What draws me back to poetry over and over again is the rawness it wields. That's what I'm after: capturing that quality in painting.

The writer I mentioned earlier, David Robilliard—I feel like you would like him. Look at this book, just pick one poem and read it.

KO: Is he dead?

SJ: He died in the '80s, I think of AIDS, but I might be wrong.

KO: I recently read a 2006 *New York Times* article about AIDS where it said

that it's not only all the artists we lost, we also lost their audience. All those people, not only were they making work, but they were also showing up for it.

SJ: We lost a culture, a generation.

KO: When you think about it, all those people were eventually going to make a ton of money, and that would have changed what became popular, as well. I think of Frank O'Hara sometimes.

SJ: I mean, he is the best. I've had this Frank O'Hara book in my studio for a decade. The book became a palette at some point, but I still read it.

KO: (*leafing through the Robilliard book*) Okay, let's see. Here is Goodnight Joe, Good morning Jack by David Robilliard. Reading that poem almost makes me cry.

SJ: I know. I spent the pandemic collecting all the weird, rare books of poetry I could get my hands on. There are not many copies of this Robilliard book. There should be more available; it's an amazing book.

KO: I really like this poem that I found. A lot of these seem a bit preachy...

SJ: They are, but poetry has that problem.

KO: I'm going to read this one, alright?

SJ: Please.

KO: (*reads*) From *Baby Lies Truthfully* by David Robilliard:

HALL OF MIRRORS TRICK OR TREAT

I'm so avant-garde
you should see
what I can do
with a credit card
play it sweet
play it neat
play it long
play it hard
hall of mirrors
trick or treat

SJ: I think that is a good line to end on.