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GUGGENHEIM

NEWS RELEASE

New Installation by Sarah Crowner Opens at The Wright Restaurant on January 29

(NEW YORK, NY – January 24, 2017)—A new installation by American artist Sarah Crowner will open at The Wright restaurant, located in the landmark Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, on January 29. Commissioned specifically for The Wright by the Guggenheim, the project consists of four works that will enter the museum's permanent collection. The project is the second in a series of interventions in the restaurant that the museum opened in 2009 with an installation by Liam Gillick, with the intention of activating this social space as a platform for creative production.

Sarah Crowner physically dissects and reshapes the legacy of modernism in works that at first appear to be geometric paintings but are in fact meticulously sewn canvas collages. Informed by the interdisciplinary practices of earlier visual artists who engaged the applied arts, poetry, theater, and dance, she merges the rarified tradition of abstraction with techniques and materials common to decor and craft. Crowner is also interested in a painting's potential to function as an environment or performative setting rather than a discrete object on a wall, frequently juxtaposing her canvas works with interventions to the floors and walls of a gallery.

Crowner's installation for The Wright restaurant directly immerses the viewer in a dynamic composition. A curving backdrop formed from stitched, painted canvas is suspended along one of the walls. In line with the artist's focus on reviving overlooked currents of 20th-century abstraction, this work splices and repeats motifs from a woven tapestry that Swedish artist Lennart Rodhe (1916–2005) created in 1961 for the sumptuous Operakällaren restaurant in Stockholm. Handmade terracotta tiles with white, blue, and yellow glazes comprise three additional works that complete the overall interplay of color, line, and pattern. Utilizing the architectural elements of a functional, inherently social space, Crowner expands the notion of what constitutes a painting and considers how the surrounding human activity might alter the experience of her work, and vice versa.

This presentation is organized by Katherine Brinson, Curator, Contemporary Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Ari Wiseman, Deputy Director, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

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VOGUE

CULTURE > ART

Sarah Crowner Crosses the Border and Collaborates
With the Ghost of Frank Lloyd Wright at the Guggenheim

JANUARY 30, 2017
by JULIA FELSENTHAL



Sarah Crowner in front of
Wall (Blue-Green Terracotta)
at The Wright restaurant,
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York

For a September 1957 New York Times article, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, then 90 years old, took the architecture writer Aline B. Saarinen on a tour of the museum he had designed to house Solomon R. Guggenheim's collection of modern art on the Upper East Side of New York City. Even if you've never been, you probably know the Guggenheim, which looks a bit like what might happen if a gorgon stared down an alien spaceship and petrified it to stone in the middle of a ritzy stretch of Fifth Avenue. Life magazine, more than a decade earlier, had already dubbed Wright's design "New York's strangest building." Over the years, it has been compared to many things, among them "an inverted cupcake," "a giant Jell-O mold," and "a washing machine," or so brags the museum's Facebook page. For her part, Saarinen thought the building, mid-construction and still two years from opening, resembled a "concrete snail."

Of course, Wright's strange exterior houses an interior that's just as unusual. "What we wanted to do was create an atmosphere suitable to the paintings," the architect told Saarinen of his gallery space, a long, spiraling ramp that works its way around an open central atrium, with a curved perimeter wall for hanging art. "Each one would exist in the whole space, the whole atmosphere, not within its rectilinear frame in a rectilinear room." Wright added, "and once he stops having to think in terms of rectangles, the painter will be free to paint on any shape he chooses—even to curve his canvas if he wants."



Backdrop (After Rodhe, 1961), 2017

Make that a she, and you could be talking about Sarah Crowner, the Brooklyn-based artist who, 60 years on, has, at least indirectly, taken the architect's provocation very much to heart. The museum recently asked Crowner to make her mark on a small piece of Frank Lloyd Wright's imposing creation: The Wright, the architect's namesake restaurant, tucked into an out-of-the-way corner of the building's ground floor. She's not the first to do so. In 2009, architect Andre Kikoski, with the help of British artist Liam Gillick, reimagined the interior of the space, transforming what had been a sort of drab cafeteria into an artfully appointed fine-dining destination. Their intervention won glowing reviews and industry awards. But years later, it was time for a facelift. Enter Crowner, whose work, like Wright's, reflects a keen interest in freeing painting from its conventional frame.

Crowner is best known for two parts of her practice: hard-edged geometric abstract paintings that, on closer examination, are actually collaged fragments of painted canvas that the artist cuts out and stitches back together; and large-scale installations of tile work, patterned mosaics grouted to walls and across floors, that she regards as paintings, too. Both parts reflect her interest in using her own artistic language to reinterpret the work of forgotten modernists, particularly women, or, as she puts it, "the ghosts of art history."

And the ghosts of architectural history: "It was a challenge collaborating with Frank on this," she jokes, when we meet at The Wright to discuss her project a few days before the restaurant reopens to the public. "I hope he won't turn over in his grave." The artist, in her early-40s, is blonde, blue-eyed, and as sunny as the weather outside is dreary—as sunny as the slab of highlighter-yellow terra-cotta tiles she mounted in the foyer of the restaurant to greet diners as they enter. The tiles trace the architect's tightly curved wall—too tight, in fact, for tiling, so Crowner had to cheat and install hers on a plywood armature with a slightly gentler bend. "My work in The Wright is really about respect," she explains. "It's respecting the curves. It's pointing to the existing architecture. It's not trying to dominate it or cross it out."

Inside the restaurant, which is cozy and shaped a little like a football, with a row of porthole windows offering a limited vantage onto 88th Street, a handful of people busily work to put the finishing touches on Crowner's vision. "It's all about: What can painting do?" the artist says. "Can we walk on a painting? Is this a painting?" She points down at the floor, made of beige and white terra-cotta tiles installed in a series of chevrons—she's liked the pattern ever since seeing it used in an interior by Wiener Werkstätte architect Josef Hoffmann—the arrows calling attention to the skewed orientation of the room. "Can it be a backdrop for something else?" she goes on. Behind her, another expanse of tiled chevrons, these in shades of turquoise, serves as back-splash for a long bar and also seems to gesture across the room at the portholes. In this topsy-turvy language, the windows of Frank Lloyd Wright's spaceship look out at dry land; the sea is inside.

In the back, hanging above a yet-to-be-installed banquette, is an actual backdrop: a broad, unstretched canvas that hugs a corner of the restaurant—again, "honor the curve"—and depicts an array of globular shapes painted in velvety jewel tones. Crowner walks me over to the canvas, pulls it away from the wall, and reveals her handiwork: a Frankenstein-ish maze of neatly stitched seams hidden in the back. "I think the hands are great teachers," she offers, telling me she's interested in finding ways to bring modernism into conversation with the tactility of craft. ("I think the best art makes you want to touch it, hold it.") She adapted the motifs for her backdrop from a tapestry designed by the late Swedish painter Lennart Rodhe for a Stockholm restaurant in 1961 and produced by a women's weaving collective. "I wasn't interested in the paintings that he made," she clarifies when I ask if it was the artist or the craftswomen with whom she felt more connection. "I was interested in the weaving, which was not made by him. Designed by him, but made by the weavers. I think that's interesting."

She scans the floor and finds what she's looking for: a tiny paw print immortalized in a tile. "Cute, right?" she asks. The prints, which pop up occasionally, are "happy accidents." These hand-glazed terra-cotta tiles come from Guadalajara, Mexico, from the workshop Cerámica Suro, helmed by Crowner's friend and serial collaborator José Noé Suro. To make them, artisans dig up local clay, knead it with water like bread, shape it in handmade wooden molds, and let it bake for a couple of days in the sun. Sometimes animals wander by—chickens, kittens, Chihuahuas—and leave their mark.



Crowner in front of Wall (Yellow Terracotta) at The Wright restaurant

We're standing, in other words, on Mexican soil, in the ghostly presence of these Mexican animals, which wander freely with no sense of borders. It feels particularly poignant given that on the day we meet, Donald Trump has just signed an executive order to hasten the building of his wall between the U.S. and Mexico, has threatened to impose massive tariffs on Mexican imports to pay for the ill-begotten project, and Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto has responded by canceling his official visit to the U.S.. It seems suddenly plausible that the exchange of skills and ideas across art-historical time may be simpler than the exchange of skills and ideas across national borders in the present. "Every time I think about it, I literally start to cry," Crowner says, and sure enough her eyes grow wet and begin to overflow. It's clear that she's upset about many things: the message Trump sends to her Mexican associates; her fears of the consequences of the president's isolationist agenda; her frustration, shared by so many, about how to keep doing the things we used to do in the face of an alarming new political reality. "If you want to talk," she says, "I've had such a hard time with this installation. I've had so many sleepless nights, worried about what I can do. Can I even be an artist anymore? It's an existential crisis. I just think what we can do is move forward, do our work. I'm an optimist. I try to be."

Her tone grows more insistent. "I'm really happy to say—and you can quote me on this—that this installation is because of our Mexican friends. This whole body of work is possible because of the open friendship I have with Mexico. The earth that makes the soil that makes these tiles comes from Guadalajara, Mexico. This is a good thing that we do together."

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ARTFORUM

Sarah Cwoner SIMON LEE | LONDON



View of “Sarah Cwoner,” 2016. On floor: Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves), 2016. On wall, from left: Sliced Red, 2016; Sliced Black Tree, 2016; Untitled, 2016. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.

Having gained wide recognition for sewn canvases and tile platforms that are reminiscent of hard-edge geometrical abstraction and sometimes double as theater sets, in her recent works Sarah Cwoner continues combining and recasting modernist abstraction and applied arts, but in ways that evoke the curvilinear forms and colors of nature. The eight sewn canvases and two tile pieces in the exhibition “Plastic Memory” transported the viewer simultaneously into the cool white-tiled Futurist-influenced interiors of Italian designer Nanda Vigo, such as the one she devised for Lo Scarabeo sotto la Foglia (1964), a house designed by Giō Ponti, which gave the title to Cwoner’s concurrent exhibition at MASS MoCA, “Beetle in the Leaves,” and the hot landscapes of the Mediterranean, where her glazed ceramic tiles were fired. The slivers of canvas and linen mostly painted red or white in Sliced Red (all works 2016) blaze like the sun, the turquoise-blue waves in Sliced Warm Blue drift by like the sea or the sky, and the black branches in Sliced Plant grow like trees, while the patterns in the white-tile Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves) and celadon-tile Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves) spread like foliage.

This joining of parts to form a whole operated both at the level of each individual work and in the exhibition overall, involving painting, architecture, and the viewer’s body. The slicing—conveying the artist’s spontaneity and physical effort in cutting up and reassembling the sewn canvases—contrasted sharply with the layout of an irregular pentagon pattern, based on a recent discovery in the field of mathematics, that tiles a plane in mirrored pairs. With its visual similarity to the abstract white sewn canvases with black or white seams, the grouted, white-tiled platform resembled a kind of painting, even as the kinesthetic qualities of the sliced canvases grouped around it solicited the viewer’s movement.

By repurposing paintings and applied arts, Cwoner changes the viewer’s relationship to them. The pattern and materiality of a painting that one could walk on reappeared in the celadon tile of Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves), pulled up as though by the butterfly wings to which the artist has likened the paired pentagon pattern. Hung right in the middle of this tile wall was an untitled white monochrome canvas with a frame painted pale lime green. A simple, strangely elegant pairing, the placement of a painting on a tile wall recalled the installation at Lo Scarabeo sotto la Foglia of its owner’s modern art collection in the building’s tiled interior—though here the functionality of the tile wall was of course part of Cwoner’s work itself—and foregrounded the relationship between work and frame, figure and ground, image plane and objecthood, painting and architecture. Rather than contribute to a total work of art, the white-tiled platform created an edge halfway into the roughly L-shaped gallery, its supporting plywood substructure blatantly visible. The painting Sliced Black Tree hung partly above the platform and partly above the regular gallery floor so that the viewer, instead of imagining a choreographed movement on the platform, was encouraged to choose from which level to view the sewn canvas and to think about the physical, psychological, and philosophical issues raised by this threshold.

The title “Plastic Memory,” a technical term for the process by which distorted clay returns to its original shape, alluded not only to Cwoner’s handling of art history but also to the viewer’s tactile and temporal experience of her work. With its reference to nature, the show addressed the connection between micro components and macro appearances; the repetition of patterns in art, architecture, and the natural world; and the viewer’s place within these relationships. And by joining beautiful forms with rich material textures, her exhibition demonstrated an admiration for the historical avant-gardes’ “cross-pollination”—in Cwoner’s own words—between the different arts while activating bodily movement in a way that was highly uplifting.

—Elisa Schaar

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frieze

REVIEW - 02 JUN 2016

Sarah Crowner

BY ISOBEL HARBISON
Simon Lee Gallery, London, UK

There's a diverting sense of horizon shifting at play when standing before Sarah Crowner's new works at Simon Lee Gallery. 'Plastic Memory', the New York-based artist's first solo show in the UK, brings together new ceramic pieces and patchwork paintings, manipulation techniques she adopted some years ago to introduce, in her words, 'immediacy and spontaneity' to her painting. Untitled (all works 2016) greets us, white acrylic on white canvas cut into 22 non-identical pieces and re-sewn, then stretched taught. Inside its frame, arcs and triangles meet pentagons and other asymmetric shapes. In each section, a watery acrylic brushstroke moves in a different direction. It's a dynamic interior boxed off by a wooden frame painted acidic red, neon almost, glowing against the white wall behind. It's a smart, swift introduction into Crowner's process: painting, washing, splitting, devising, reconstructing, tightening, offsetting and elevating.



Sarah Crowner, 'Plastic Memory', 2016, exhibition view at Simon Lee Gallery, London. All images courtesy: the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London

This process is adapted to ceramics in Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves) – a tiled platform raised six inches above the ground on a visible timber frame, which extends almost flush to the gallery’s L-shape floor. The tiles have been made and glazed by specialist Spanish ceramicists and differing shades of white emerge on their surface from their final firing. Each one is an irregular pentagon, a shape Crowner has set into a repetitive, slowly discernable pattern. The narrow gap between wall and platform creates a shadowy periphery similar to Untitled’s frame. Here the floor is the pictorial plane, grouted platform mimicking stitched canvas. Both painting and platform are geometric abstractions that Crowner has arrived at by way of various applied art and performative influences. In past works she’s referenced mid-century decor: from an avant-garde theatre curtain designed by Polish artist Maria Jarema in 1956, to the background motifs of a 1950s Harper’s Bazaar fashion shoot, to Josef Hoffmann’s fabric patterns. These references are drawn together in paintings and ceramics resembling the work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp or Lygia Clark, amongst other artists who cross-pollinated their painterly abstractions with experiments in sculpture, architecture, craft, textiles and performance.

Crowner introduced platforms into her work in 2011, so there’s long been a sense that as viewers, we’re implicated in her theatre of display. However, here we seem less enclosed in a reflexive mise-en-scène, than a cool antechamber to the great outdoors. Sliced Black Tree strikes painted black sections into white canvas sheets, a stark arboreal form. Natural elements materialize through Crowner’s processes too, with liquid and light evoked by the coloration of canvas pieces or pigmented ceramics. Clay’s ‘plastic memory’, the marks it preserves after being fired, is a material sensitivity that’s shared by painting and this tactility or physicality permeates throughout her works. We get submerged in Untitled, all pieces painted a deep blue lapped by notes of teal and turquoise; and elsewhere, in Sliced Red, among fourteen white panels, seven of fiery red appear, bearing down upon us like an angry morning sky.



Sarah Crowner, Sliced Black Tree, 2016, acrylic on canvas, sewn, 1.5 x 1.2 m

The second of the ceramic pieces, Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves), uses the same tile shape and pattern as the first but is vertical and wall mounted. The surface of these glazed blue tiles seems penetrable. Standing alongside it, we might also be lying on the floor of a swimming pool or a deep seabed. It seems incredible, given the ostensible familiarity of painterly abstraction, that the work manages to feel so physically compelling. And that after this sensation something purposeful lingers. Crowner’s grouting, stitching and elevating subtly expose the seams, margins and carefully constructed platforms that are part of the history of abstraction. There is value – necessity, even – in unpicking the hard edges of an avant-garde narrative that has so often excluded female artists, in treating it as a memory as plastic and malleable as clay’s.

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GUERNICA

 / a magazine of art & politics

Touch the Tile

Elizabeth Karp-Evans interviews Sarah Crowner

May 16, 2016

The artist discusses sewn paintings, tiled murals, and viewer inhibitions.



Installation view, Sarah Crowner, *Beetle in the Leaves*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, 2016, Photo: David Dashiell

Visual artist Sarah Crowner's work has been described as many things: lyrical, hard-edge painting, primary abstraction, non-painterly. Curator Gary Carrion-Murayari coined it "Personal Modernism." She has been declared a painter, a sculptor, and an installation artist during her career, but none of these terms feel comprehensive enough, nor do they do the artist, or her work, justice. Standing in front of Crowner's abstract sewn paintings or her large-scale tile installations, one is filled with a sense of modernism's profound influence on her work as well as with her deft ability to harness the energies of the natural world.

This spring, Crowner's work will appear in two major shows; *Beetle in the Leaves*, which runs from April 16 through February 2017 at MASS MoCA (Crowner's first museum show in the US) and *Plastic Memory*, which opened May 13th at Simon Lee gallery in London. Both exhibitions feature the artist's sewn paintings—cut-up pieces of raw and painted canvas, reconfigured and re-stitched to form a new surface—as well as new tile works, installed both on the floor and hanging from the walls.

The fluidity with which Crowner navigates different media—painting, sculpture, and ceramics—reveals a vast range of influences: from hard-edge painting and Op artists like Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley—who inspired Crowner’s large-scale black and white geometric installation, *Continuum*, 1963, shown at the 2010 Whitney Biennial—to the magazine editor Alexander Lieberman and decades-old issues of Harper’s Bazaar. These oscillations are what makes the artist so hard to classify and, perhaps, is what has kept her from the spotlight for so long.

Crowner was born in Philadelphia and attended graduate school in New York, but she spent much of her early life on the West coast—Santa Cruz, Oakland, and Portland—where she took up painting. “I spent all those hard years by myself, making bad art,” she told me when we met in her soon-to-be-abandoned Gowanus studio. She is moving to a larger studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and speaks about those years with residual consternation and amusement. “I still work a lot,” she tells me. “I really don’t want to ever stop.”

That seems improbable. Crowner is interested in not only creating new modes of painterly expression, but in the studied reinterpretation and elevation of existing art histories. In all her mediums, she’s able to capture, in the words of Bridget Riley, “the dynamism of visual forces.” It is Crowner’s ability to cross genre, to collapse time, even, that makes her artistic voice at once challenging and essential.

—Elizabeth Karp-Evans for *Guernica*



Sarah Crowner, *Double Swan Peacock*, 2015, Acrylic on canvas and raw canvas, sewn, 78 x 70" / 198.1 x 177.8cm each, Photo: Jean Vong

Guernica: You have two shows opening this spring. Is it difficult to present two bodies of work at the same time?

Sarah Crowner: It seems like, the last six years, there’s always been another deadline, but I’m always working towards something. With these two shows, there are plenty of cross-references. For example, I’m using a similar tile pattern in both shows; one in fired terra cotta, and one using hand-painted cement. Also, the paintings for the show in London come out of the process of making the paintings for the show at MASS MoCA.

Guernica: Your work is often informed by the physical space of a gallery or museum. Did the spaces in Massachusetts and London influence these shows?

Sarah Crowner: The MASS MoCA show is an example of a physical space that I had to reckon with that was very limiting, but also inspiring, because it was not a clean white cube. It’s raw ceiling beams, rough brick walls, and floorboards. It looks a lot like this studio, in a way. There’s this history that’s embedded in that building and I wanted to draw on that and pay attention to that.

The show is a lot about patterns. I'm making a tile mural and a tile platform, both large-scale, originating from a pattern that was just discovered by a group of young mathematicians. The platform is one thousand square feet and the wall mural is twenty feet by ten feet. Both are made out of a particular pentagon design. The sewn paintings in the show are made using patterns as well, similar to the way that a tailor would use a pattern to make a suit.

Guernica: How did you come to use patterns in your paintings?

Sarah Crowner: Living in Santa Cruz, the Bay Area, and Oregon, I was always taking hikes and going on a lot of solitary walks. I didn't make this connection until recently, but I think the forms, colors, and beauty in nature that I experienced are suddenly coming up in my work now. Back then, we didn't have iPhones—there was a lot of wandering around just looking at things. I think that time was a real gift.

Artwork exists in relation to the world around it, so at MASS MoCA I thought about the interior—the beams, the bricks on the wall—behind the paintings. When you're standing on this huge tile platform, your experience of looking at the paintings and these beams is going to be very different than if you were standing in a perfectly white gallery space. Here, you're standing on this geometric abstraction, on a painting in a way, and it changes the way we receive art. I find it interesting how pattern informs your reception.

Guernica: You're using pattern as a way to recontextualize familiar space?

Sarah Crowner: Yes, with this show in particular. I really paid attention to the architecture: where the beams were, where the floorboards met with this very old glass, the windowpanes and ancient windows. There's a grid in there. In order to make that show, I found a new pentagon pattern that was recently discovered. The form can only be repeated with its mirror so it's not a singular form or tile that's repeating; it's the double. I thought that this was a brilliant but really subtle concept: something that can only be repeated with its partner. As a way of regenerating. It's very natural.

I also painted on the cement tiles rather than using a terracotta glaze. Glaze can be sprayed or brushed on, and when you fire it, different things happen to the color that can be stunning, but accidental. With this new work, I wanted to paint decisive and gestural brushstrokes, to relate the work to the paintings.

Guernica: Did you make the tiles yourself?

Sarah Crowner: I worked with a factory in Morocco. I had a mold made, and we made about two thousand tiles. I went there with my assistant, Nicky, and we got a bunch of house paint and painted a few different colors all over. They look very brushy, kind of white-washed in a way. Some I left raw. Then they cured and were sealed and shipped to Massachusetts, where they'll be sealed again and placed in the floor and grouted. The end result is kind of like a vibrating painting, the way the brush strokes in one tile might be going one way and the brush strokes in another tile might go in a different direction, but they all run up against each other. It was really an attempt at interruption of gesture.

Guernica: What is it like to work in an environment like Morocco when you're envisioning a show in Massachusetts?

Sarah Crowner: It's a big leap of faith, because one can only imagine how the work will look in the space. I didn't know what the tile platform was going to look like until it was finished. I rendered it on the computer, and I think I know what it's going to look like, but I had never done it before; no one has. This pattern, as far as we know, has never been tested on a surface, because it's brand new.

Guernica: Your paintings also relate to this idea of bringing together different parts to form a whole, constructing something that's visually brand new.

Sarah Crowner: Exactly. Earlier, I had all these different pieces of a cut-up painting on the floor. It's a lot of me saying, "Does this work this way? Does it work that way?" and arriving at a pattern. Then I sew it together. I'll stretch it, and then maybe slice it up again. It might end up smaller than originally intended, or back in pieces. The process has become very lengthy.

Guernica: Why did you begin to work with tile and ceramics?

Sarah Crowner: In the very beginning, I was working in New York and I wasn't feeling like I had found my voice in painting. I was very frustrated with painting, although I love paint, and I love working with paint. I felt that there was something missing, and it was something tactile—I wanted to get into the work, to touch it, to manipulate it. I met somebody who told me about a ceramics residency at Hunter.

Guernica: They're construction. The whole process is very constructivist.

Sarah Crowner: They're construction, yes, or building. I think that art history can be a medium that can be manipulated in the same way that a material, like paint or clay, can be. You can work with your hands; you can touch it. What if we could open art history books and pull the contents out and stretch out the forms, reverse the forms, collapse them?

Guernica: That seems to be happening with craft art, connecting it with modernism, with fine art; it means something different than it did sixty years ago. Did you intend to draw on this collapsing when you started making the tile pieces?

Sarah Crowner: I didn't really intend it until I arrived at it; I've been pushing it ever since. At MASS MoCA, I am showing a tile mural, but the feeling I am interested in is a kind of "lifting" a tile floor up and hanging it on the wall, elevating it and treating it as a painting. It has become something between painting, wall, and floor.

Guernica: Is part of changing the viewers' experience of time, slowing it down, a conscious choice to eliminate the frame?

Sarah Crowner: When you're standing on a tile floor and you're looking at a painting, you're really receiving the painting in a different way than you would if you were in a white cube space, or something more generic. You're standing on a composition. You're looking at a composition. It's using your body to receive the painting: it's a bodily experience.

Guernica: You get compared to Bridget Riley but there's something more organic about your painting; a looser geometry to it. Do you think this is due to the physical nature of constructing the work?

Sarah Crowner: There's a real quickness and spontaneity to my work—especially with the new work, which is coming out of taking a form and then slicing it up and reorganizing it—that's not really planned out. I have referenced Bridget Riley directly. I saw a photograph of her standing in her own installation, almost like a spiral room of zigzags. It's a famous picture, and these zigzag black and white forms envelop her. Making those paintings was an attempt to look at the way a work has been photographed, not at the painted forms themselves.

Here, I was studying a reproduction, not studying the actual Riley art object. That's where I feel like I have the license to have a little bit more fun. I think if you're going to spend your life doing something, you should enjoy it. Thinking about painting and making painting gives me a huge amount of joy.

Guernica: Your works are very tactile and draw inspiration from the natural world, but technology also plays a large role. Would your work be different in a different time?

Sarah Crowner: Definitely. Think about if it were the late 1970s and we were in the art historical moment of pattern and decoration. There were artists at this time thinking about decoration in a way that was against compositional painting. Pattern is non-compositional; it's one shape repeated again and again. It's nonhierarchical. I think the feminist artists of the pattern and decoration movement were saying that's what makes it essentially a female thing: perhaps composition is male, and non-composition is female.

I also use Photoshop a lot. I use my camera, I use scanners, I use Amazon or eBay to find the early 1950s Harper's Bazaar where the Ray Johnson backdrops were printed for the first time. I made a whole series of paintings based on these Ray Johnson backdrops he painted for Harper's Bazaar in 1957.

Guernica: You take a lot of inspiration from publications.

Sarah Crowner: I love art books. I thought if I wasn't an artist, I would have my own art bookstore. I have spent a lot of time in libraries. When I was growing up in LA, I would go to the UCLA library. In San Francisco I snuck into the San Francisco Art Institute library. There were Xerox machines. It was a different way of gathering information. I was reading a lot of books—Agnes Martin's writings, reading a book about Jessica Stockholder—and reading a lot about women artists in particular.

Guernica: You moved from the West Coast to New York for grad school. Was it easier to find an artist community?

Sarah Crowner: The thing about New York, which is great, is that it's such a practical education. I got a job at Printed Matter to support myself through Hunter College. I found that this was a better education than graduate school, because I was working day-to-day with real artists making a medium that wasn't just precious—it was a book. I ended up starting the bookstore side of Dexter Sinister, which was a basement publishing project in Chinatown, handling production. I worked for the Oldenburgs. Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, before she passed away. I was their studio manager for a few years. Then I worked for Rudolf Stingel for a few years.

I saw that it was possible to have a life as an artist, and although there are so many factors at work, mostly one has to show up every day to the studio. It sounds very simplistic, but so much has to do with showing up. I gained a lot of practical knowledge in New York: You have to make a living, so what are you going to do? You should try to do what you love.

Guernica: What's your show at Simon Lee going to be like?

Sarah Crowner: We're going to have about seven or eight paintings and a tile platform using the same pentagon pattern, but using glossy white glaze on the floors. It's a long, skinny gallery, and the platform goes halfway through the gallery, so the viewers have to walk on it. Then there's going to be a wall piece, a tiled mural. At some point, you'll be standing on a composition and looking at another composition that relates to the one on the floor. It's about asking viewers how they'll receive each work. One, you walk on, and the other is treated as a painting, but they're the same.

I'm really interested in the audience's reception of painting and what painting is, and what it can be. It's possibilities. I wonder if people will try to touch the tile mural. I hope they do, but we've all been taught you're not supposed to touch anything that's on the wall if you go into a gallery. Yet it's the same material installed on the floor.

Guernica: Are you surprised by the way people react to, or act in, your installations?

Sarah Crowner: In a gallery in Brussels I once made a platform that was made of raw MDF. It was a simple platform that covered the entire footprint of the gallery. You had to step up about seven inches and you were on the platform, it was like a stage. People were so nervous just to step up! Several paintings were hanging on the walls, but the only way the viewer could really look at them was if you were standing on this simple raised platform. People were afraid to do it at first because they felt they were on stage. They wondered: What's going to happen? It's this interesting psychological space that changes when you feel like you're on stage.

Guernica: Presenting a stage, constructing your paintings, making books; your work is very much production-based. Is part of having a show come together bringing these immersive, laborious experiences into the space as well?

Sarah Crowner: For me, being an artist is about doing. Of course there is also thinking, reflecting, contextualizing. But for me, thinking is doing. It is a way of understanding through making. It is also a solitary act, even though you may have assistance sometimes. You have to go into your studio and spend a lot of time by yourself, and be okay with that.

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modernpainters

SARAH CROWNER

The story behind an artwork, in the artist's own words

I've always wanted to make a painting that a person could stand on. I liked the idea that someone can view a composition on the wall while standing within a different composition on the ground. A couple of years ago, I made an installation composed of a 1,000-square-foot platform covered with handmade, blue-green glazed terra-cotta tiles. I loved working with terra-cotta, but for my show at MASS MoCA I wanted to try a different tile-making technique--using cement this time, which I knew I could hand paint and seal, and then install the way I would if I were composing a painting. I discovered the Popham Design factory in Morocco, which was open to fabricating uncommon shapes and forms, where the tiles are made using cement--such a soft absorbent texture, unlike the glassy, reflective glazed clay I used before. Mathematically, my new pentagon form can be tiled and repeated only with its mirror; it needs its opposite in order to repeat. To me, these tiles look like an open book, bird's wings, or leaves.

I traveled to Marrakech in January to work in the factory, and painted each tile individually. If you look closely, you can find certain motifs repeated everywhere: in architecture, in nature, in art. I'm curious to see how the tiles' forms will react with or against the shapes in the leaflike paintings I am making, as well as with the birch trees outside the museum windows, which will be blooming when the show opens.



Images from the Popham Design factory in Marrakech, including the bags of cement used to make Crowner's tiles (top left), the tiles in the midst of being painted, and a friendly feline who calls the factory home.

Sarah Crowner's exhibition "Beetle in the Leaves" opens April 16 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams.

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ART SCENE

BONDING AGENT

Artist Sarah Crowner finds beauty in both bold shapes and the spaces in between

Look closely at artist Sarah Crowner's graphic paintings. What at first appear to be painted modernist abstractions are in fact assemblages of canvas cutouts—some raw, others coated with pigment—that she has meticulously stitched together. Ranging from simple geometries to more sensuous organic shapes, the motifs call to mind the hard-edged precision of Ellsworth Kelly, Lorser Feitelson, and Lygia Clark. But while bold silhouettes and patterns remain a primary fixation for Crowner, she is equally interested in how things fit together. "It's a way of creating form by joining material," Crowner says of her process, which she uses to bring more tactility to the medium. "They are really objects more than paintings."

Raised in Los Angeles and based in New York since 1999, Crowner exudes a laid-back vibe even as she's finishing work for two upcoming shows—one opening April 16 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) and the other debuting at London's

Simon Lee Gallery on May 13. Pieces in progress abound at her sun-splashed Brooklyn studio, amid canvas shapes painted a deep teal hanging on a line to dry and heaps of paper cutouts numbered like tailor's patterns. Several large-scale compositions repeat a simplified wavelike form inspired by a 1934 work by Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the Swiss Dada powerhouse. "I pull a lot from art history," Crowner says.

The decorative arts also provide rich fodder. For the MASS MoCA exhibition, Crowner is installing a floor comprising hundreds of hand-painted cement tiles that visitors will walk on. She chose an unusual shape for the mosaic: "Pentagons are really hard to fit together, so you rarely see them in tiles," she says, adding that the in-between spaces really fascinate her most. And there is a palpable energy in the grouting—an underlying force pushing and pulling. Those seams, like the stitching in her paintings, might take a backseat visually to the intensely seductive sunny colors, but they also keep everything in place. —MEREDITH MENDELSON



Top: The Brooklyn studio of artist Sarah Crowner (above); she is represented in the U.S. by Casey Kaplan gallery (caseykapiangallery.com).

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY RACHEL TOLEDO FOR ABTP.COM

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SARAH CROWNER: BEETLE IN THE LEAVES



On view beginning April 16, 2016

Opening Reception
Saturday, April 16, 5–6:30pm



Sarah Crowner, *Reversed C*, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, sewn, 78 × 60 in (198.1 × 152.4 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

Artist Sarah Crowner mines the legacy of abstraction from both the fine and applied arts, treating art history itself as a medium to be manipulated—sampling, collaging, and rearranging existing images to create new forms. Her practice—which includes ceramics, tile floors, sculptures, and theater curtains—centers around sewn paintings that she makes by stitching together sections of raw or painted canvas or linen. The hybrid paintings borrow from the language of collage, as well as quilting, with visible stitching functioning as both line and surface.

Crowner's exhibition at MASS MoCA—her first solo exhibition in a U.S. museum—features both existing paintings and major tile works designed and fabricated for the show. A raised tiled floor and two tiled walls in the central gallery create a *mise en abyme* (i.e., a room within a room, as well as an exhibition within an exhibition). Inspired by the utopian design of modernist architect Nanda Vigo's *Casa Brindisi*—conceived as both a home and a museum for Remo Brindisi's art collection and as an experiment in the integration of the arts—Crowner's tiled structure functions as a platform and backdrop for a selection of her large paintings. This installation invites viewers to engage directly—face to face, visually, and spatially—with the works, which in turn operate like performers on the raised stage, enveloping the viewer in the scene. The hard, glossy nature of the tiles and the hard edges of their uniform grid structure provide counterpoints to the softly textured canvas and curvilinear forms of Crowner's paintings. Several of the artist's large, monochrome paintings—made of sections of raw canvas sewn together and thinly outlined with frames of bright color—are presented in adjoining spaces. A new large-scale painting made from terra-cotta tiles, designed by the artist for a previous platform

work and produced and hand-glazed in Mexico, literally frames the floor as a painting. Both this work and the tiled room engage directly with the geometries of the museum's mill architecture variously mirroring and creating juxtapositions with the pattern of the brick, the direction of the boards in the hardwood floors, and the grid of glass bricks embedded in the gallery wall.

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The New York Times

Galleries of New York: Chelsea A Maze of Art Endures in the Shadow of Towers

By Roberta Smith



Works by Sarah Crowner at Casey Kaplan Gallery. Credit Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

CASEY KAPLAN

The pressure on galleries is reflected in Casey Kaplan's relocation inland, to West 27th Street east of Seventh Avenue. The current show at the new address is Sarah Crowner's third solo in New York — and her best yet. Working with a flexible geometric vocabulary, she produces paintings whose taut visual clarity is the result of meticulously sewing together contrasting pieces of painted or raw canvas. Ms. Crowner's shapes are usually scavenged, suggesting that reality is rife with potential abstraction. A recurring pair of arabesques echoes a design used by the artist Ray Johnson in a backdrop for a 1957 fashion shoot in Harper's Bazaar. An especially strong blue and white work magnifies a fabric pattern by the Austrian modernist Koloman Moser (1868-1918). In some new works, Ms. Crowner fragments her found shapes for greater complexity, a promising development.

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THE LAST MAGAZINE



SARAH CROWNER'S MODERNIST PATCHWORKS

by Kevin Greenberg

At first glance, “Everywhere the Line is Looser,” Sarah Crowner’s third show in New York, and her début at Casey Kaplan, harkens back to an earlier era of abstraction: the bold forms, flat fields of color, and crisp compositions of Crowner’s generously sized wall works recall the immediate visual pleasure of Ellsworth Kelly. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that Crowner is not simply painting a single stretched and gessoed canvas, but rather assembling a patchwork of individual pieces, both painted and unfinished, with subtle, visible seams.

Crowner is unabashed about her historical reference points: one recurring motif was inspired by the backdrop to a spread from 1957 issue of Harper’s Bazaar, in which the couture outfits intermingled sensuously with a graphic backdrop. The connection to fashion is no accident: the artist’s work implies an explicit interest in the connections between textile design and the language of classical modern abstraction and the applied arts.

The installation of Crowner’s works in the gallery displays a lively, lyrical counterpoint, and some of the most pleasurable works are the ones in which Crowner has chosen a monochromatic palette. These tonal studies seem designed to bring the act of sewing and material manipulation—integral components of the artist’s process—to the forefront for closer inspection. Throughout it all, there is an unexpected sense of nuance and confidence in Crowner’s adopted language. By turns bold, invigorating, and absorbing, Crowner manages to imbue her works with more depth than their surefooted compositions might at first suggest.

“Everywhere the Line is Looser” runs through Saturday at Casey Kaplan, 121 West 27th Street, New York.

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Sarah Crowner

Everywhere the Line is Looser

April 2 – May 2

Opening Thursday, April 2, 6-8pm

Casey Kaplan is pleased to announce an exhibition by Sarah Crowner (b. 1974, Philadelphia), *Everywhere the Line is Looser*, the artist's first with the gallery.

Crowner's paintings rest equally in form as they do in method – patterns are drawn, painted, cut, sewn and stretched, in a process that intimately connects a composition with its making. Shapes are repeated, reversed, rotated, and cropped, enacting a play between purpose and practicality. Lines are created by joining panels of canvas together, thereby displaying the surface's sewn construction. Through mirroring and fragmentation, Crowner brings our attention to the works' subtleties. For example, *Reversed C* and *Reversed Stretched C* show what appears to be the same form repeated, yet variations in the sewn panels as well as in coloration and brushwork are revealed.

Many of the fundamental, lyrical forms within the exhibition find inspiration in a Harper's Bazaar fashion shoot from 1957. Photographed in black and white, the female models' bodies and clothing have synergy with the graphic backdrops constructing the scenes: a curve of the waistline in the foreground of one woman merges into the calligraphic line of the background. In this new body of work, the figure becomes an integral material with graphic potential, mirroring the flatness of the backdrops.

Central to Crowner's practice is research into the history of 20th century abstraction and modernist design, as well as an obvious penchant for textile production. Rooted in these various lineages, Crowner's works display a contradiction: they are as much paintings as they are objects. Each composition withdraws from the original sources while at the same time reveals an intimate connection in their handmade quality. The effect is simultaneously one of reverence and irreverence.

Everywhere the Line is Looser additionally marks the first exhibition in which Crowner displays works from an ongoing series referred to as monochromes. These surfaces are assembled from the raw canvas remnants and negatives of former compositions, and act as registers of the labor, movement, and action of Crowner's practice in the studio. Presented always in painted, handmade supports, they bring attention to the potential of our relationship to material and form.

Sarah Crowner's work is currently on view in *Repetition and Difference*, curated by Jens Hoffman and Daniel Palmer at the Jewish Museum, New York. In 2016, her work will be the subject of a solo exhibition at Mass Moca, North Adams, MA. Crowner's work has additionally been included in group exhibitions at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2014; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2013; WIELS, Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2013; ICA Philadelphia, 2013; Zacheta National Museum of Art, Warsaw, 2013; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2013; and the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Crowner's work is held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

GALLERY ARTISTS: KEVIN BEASLEY, HENNING BOHL, MATTHEW BRANNON, JEFF BURTON, NATHAN CARTER, SARAH CROWNER, N. DASH, JASON DODGE, TRISHA DONNELLY, HARRIS EPAMINONDA, GEOFFREY FARMER, LIAM GILICK, GIORGIO GRIFFA, ANNIKA VON HAUSSWOLFF, BRIAN JUNGEN, SANYA KANTAROVSKY, MATEO LÓPEZ, JONATHAN MONK, MARLO PASCUAL, DIEGO PERRONE, JULIA SCHMIDT, SIMON STARLING, DAVID THORPE, GABRIEL VORMSTEIN, GARTH WEISER, JOHANNES WOHNSEIFER

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frieze

THE FAN CLUB

Why enthusiasm, not scholarship,
motivates artists

by Julian Hoeber

The painting *Conceptual Art* (1987) by Jim Shaw reads: 'he drew the dirtiest thing he could think of.' It is a doppelgänger of the early text works John Baldessari made in the late 1960s. The layout and font are the same, but the message is strange. Baldessari's works are politely sarcastic aphorisms about art and art-making – 'this painting contains all the information needed by the art student. told simply and expertly by a successful, practicing painter and teacher. every phase of drawing and painting is fully covered' or 'generally speaking, paintings with light colors sell more quickly than paintings with dark colors.' Shaw's painting, by contrast, aches with sweaty-palmed teenage urges. Baldessari's civilized tone is swapped for a direct embrace of the lower drives that motivate much art-making. Shaw's work isn't a critique of Baldessari; it's an unfettering of the desire to do something wrong that's implicit in the elder artist's works.

Shaw, whose first New York survey exhibition, 'The End is Here', opens this month at the New Museum, reliably ferments perversity in other cultural material. An unlikely version of a Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (In NYC I Saw Some Paintings ...)* (1996) or a bestial version of a Robert Rauschenberg such as his *I Dreamed I Slept with the Devil* (1988), which are loaded with the spooky machinations of his subconscious, are par for the course. In the work *Melting Comic* (1967–68), made when Shaw was 16, he drew the pages of a Hawkman comic that, frame by frame, began to liquify, suggesting that an imagination doesn't distinguish between a picture and a thing – they both exist in the mind as images to be transmogrified. If Shaw hadn't grown up to be a

famous artist, his dream-like productions could have been classified as something else: fan fiction.

For most people, the stereotypical idea of fan fiction is either E.L. James's *50 Shades of Grey* (2011) – a book that originated as a smutty re-imagining of Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' series (2005–08) – or an episode of *Star Trek* (1966–ongoing) in which Spock and Kirk end up screwing. It's usually thought of as a debased form of art made by know-nothings and outsiders: a form that's slightly embarrassing. But the same could be said of the low pop-culture material Shaw was rummaging through in the 1980s and '90s, at the height of appropriation art, to make projects such as *My Mirage* (1986–91), his visual *Bildungsroman* about the life of the fictional character Billy, rendered in an encyclopaedic array of pop-cultural and art-historical styles. Though it shares some qualities with appropriation, fan fiction is different because, as the word 'fan' implies, there's room to be excited about the material that's being borrowed. Capital 'A' Appropriation is a critical practice: it looks for a chink in the armour of other art forms and tries to use that weakness to rebuke or disrupt them. By contrast, fan fiction embraces the original material. The kinking-up of characters is an example of how fan-authors can play with a text as if it were their own, gleaning what they like in it while nurturing that which is latent.

In his classic volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), French scholar Michel de Certeau equates reading with stealing from the rich. He says, 'Readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves.' De Certeau rejected the idea that readers are empty vessels waiting to be filled with 'correct' meanings by an author, and thought they were able to take their own meaning from a text.¹ Working with De Certeau's premise, theorist Henry Jenkins, in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), a foundational work in the study of fan fiction, argues that fans participate in culture by injecting texts with sloppy interpretations, fugitive meanings and mis-readings.² Like Shaw,



Backdrop design
by Ray Johnson
for a photoshoot
in *Harper's
Bazaar*, February,
1957

many contemporary artists are fans of art history. They sort through it and pluck out the funky bits; they imagine new possibilities through idiosyncratic readings.

Sarah Crowner, who is mostly known as a painter, tinkers with images that she collects and arranges, one against another, and rolls around in her imagination to make something new. For an exhibition this year at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York, she took a 1957 fashion spread from *Harper's Bazaar* that used backdrops by Ray Johnson and extracted, fragmented and stretched them to produce paintings that are proxies for Johnson's graphics. Installed in a gallery, the works become a stage for viewers to drift through like the models in a magazine, allowing them to do in real space what was impossible in a picture. The paintings aren't critiques of Johnson or *Harper's Bazaar*: they're the unauthorized creation of an alternate reality. They're what their sources could have become, given different circumstances.

Where Crowner 'poaches', Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002) asked permission. At first glance, this collection of pop-cultural interpretations looks more like fan fiction than Crowner's work. Their project entailed the purchase of the copyright of Ann Lee, a minor Japanese manga character, for the purpose of liberating her. Previously doomed to a terminal narrative arc, she's allowed to continue to live in the creations of various other artists that Huyghe and Parreno enlist to produce works with her. However, the project is not governed by the artists' love of Ann Lee. Instead it's invested in the power of law.

It's curious that Huyghe and Parreno would legally purchase Ann Lee's copyright, since they operate in an art world where unlicensed borrowing is de rigueur. Maybe it's because, like much fan fiction, the narratives produced for *No Ghost* ... aren't criticism or parody, and the use of Ann Lee without copyright might not be defensible as fair use. But, while the legal construction of her freedom gives

conceptual depth to the project and makes her officially 'open source'³, you have to wonder what the project might have been if they had just stolen her. The acquiescence to bureaucracy in the work reinforces copyright laws, whereas the politics of fan fiction are built on a belief that there's a natural right to cultural participation. In this mode of thinking, Ann Lee was always free: Huyghe and Parreno just had to believe it.

Let's say an artist's method is always open-source.⁴ The theorist Benjamin Bratton suggests as much when he points to Jackson Pollock's drip technique, borrowed from the relatively unknown painter Janet Sobel, to show the difference between originating something and making an impact with it. Dripping paint is synonymous with Pollock but it's also a shared idea, available to everyone. It's hard not to think that Pollock's success with the drip was partly because he was already in a position to capitalize on it. After all, Pollock saw Sobel's work while with Clement Greenberg, in a show at *The Art of This Century*, Peggy Guggenheim's New York gallery. Greenberg later admitted Sobel's work was the first example of all-over painting he'd seen.⁵ It's not totally clear why Sobel faded from visibility, but one can assume her virtual-outsider status and the fact that she was a homemaker in the 1940s didn't help her cause in the male-dominated world of abstract expressionism. So, while there's something to be said for an absolute right to appropriation, having the chance to be heard or seen matters too. Part of what De Certeau and Jenkins were both getting at was who gets to dictate meaning. Drip painting is open-source, but not all versions of it are equal. It isn't the same thing for Pollock, who was, by then, already being embraced by the New York critical apparatus, to steal drips from the barely known Sobel as it is for thousands of up-and-comers to steal drips from the now-canonical Pollock. De Certeau's idea of poaching doesn't work if we think about a landowner stealing just a teensy bit from a peasant. It also doesn't work if we think of a famous artist stealing from an unknown.

Part of what was revolutionary in works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and a slew of others in the early 20th century was bringing imagery pilfered from African, Oceanic and pre-Columbian art into the centre of European painting. Picasso's images weren't sui generis, but they laid claim to that status by pretending the artists they riffed on weren't artists at all. The inability to fully acknowledge those origins makes it more larceny than poaching. The continuing revival of modernist-style figuration by artists such as Aaron Curry, Anton Henning, Thomas Houseago and Christoph Ruckhäberle, to name only a few, owes a lot to non-European art but, in terms of criticism, that debt is usually paid to the Europeans, such as Picasso, who persistently hold the imagination.

The history of how non-European forms were taken by the West and used to represent a fetishized irrationality and authenticity is, by now, well-established. That giant history lurks in any art which mines early-20th-century 'primitivism' for its formal and expressive possibilities. As Boris Groys has observed, the sacral power of African and Oceanic art objects is still redacted, even if unconsciously, in third-generation references to European modernism. There's an inadvertent participation in a problematic kind of cultural appropriation in work that builds on the painterly and emotive styles of Die Brücke, fauvism or early cubism. One of the problems of ignoring well-established interpretations in favour of your own readings is the carry-over of unintended embedded meanings. The De Certeau/Jenkins model of creative interpretation of history has its pitfalls, too.

Sean Landers's use of forms from Picasso as material in his own paintings avoids this problem through critical distance. Instead of macho Oedipal struggles, Landers works in an ironic version of the romantic tradition, paying homage with clear self-doubt: it's more jokes than pathos. In his grandest 'Picasso' work, the gag is writ large, literally: he rearranges totally convincing Picasso-esque forms so that they spell out the word Genius (2001).

Landers performs the hallmarks of the authentic artist with a wink, using tricks and signs for sincerity.⁶ Where artists such as Ruckhäberle et al. seem to have gone full method actor in their approach, Landers's version of Picasso is playing him in a comedy sketch. His postmodern retort to genius is a shoulder-shrug at its real possibility. On the surface, it's somewhat 'critical' because of its Duchampian style, but its challenge to Picasso is a chuckle-inducing and delicate snark. These other artists – Houseago in particular, because of a sincere investment in coaxing drama and feeling from this tradition – present a tougher problem for the usual historical narrative.

Working in a sculptural idiom that's a blend of Picasso and Henry Moore cranked to architectural scale, Houseago's interviews and Instagram posts suggest he believes in a historical continuity of great sculpture in which he plans to be the latest installment. He's an art history fan par excellence; his knowledge of the history of sculpture is tremendous.



Sarah Crowner, *Reversed Stretched C*, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, sewn, 96 x 79"

Rather than kill the father, Houseago has gone into the family business. His sculptures are modernism grown from heirloom seeds. The earnestness of Houseago's attachment to 'the heroic sculptor' idea is radical because it ignores progress in favour of a belief that there's more to squeeze out of that moment in history. Viewing his work as modernism seen through the lens of De Certeau shows what's both contemporary and perverse in it. Houseago has a playful love of the complex formal and emotional possibilities in all of that history and the desire to create unauthorized narratives from it. It's a full investment in the idea of greatness with none of the self-conscious tempering of Landers, and plenty of creative misreading of modernist imperative to produce 'The New'. Houseago has been accused of an apolitical, nostalgic aesthetic,⁸ and it's partly justified, but his ignoring of the idea of progress is also a rejection of modernism's imperative to break new ground. His pursuit of heroic art by making fan-fiction versions of art history is, in its own way, the weirdest rejection of a Greenbergian teleology.

Admittedly, works of art that owe a lot to the past risk veering towards what is called in business-sociology jargon – an appropriate language for describing much of today's art world – 'mimetic isomorphism'. That is, the copying of a competitor's product for profit with minimal creative labour, and without exactly understanding why it's being done. There's no doubt a robust market will produce artists who cynically make art that looks like Art in order to appeal to what David Geers calls, 'the collecting class, largely unexposed to the critique of modernism'.⁹ However, sorting out what it is and

isn't made in good faith is a fool's errand and besides the point: assholes can make good art, too. Instead, the question has to be: does a work offer up new interpretations? Does it tend to unfinished business? Does it develop erotic attachments where we've never seen them before? In order to be interesting, art working like fan fiction has to be – for lack of a better phrase – kinda fucked-up.

There is a tendency in contemporary culture to dig into the past to re-imagine a new present. There's no undiscovered country left for art. Very little remains of the old avantgardist strategy of pulling stuff from the margins into the centre to produce the shock of the new. Instead, we have to dig up lost relics that our present culture can shed new light on. So-called research-based practices tend to unearth obscure or forgotten source material, while fan fiction often engages authoritative texts. Both share the prospect of revising the past. The obvious difference, though, is that fan fiction seems unserious and a bit cornball. We expect artists' enthusiasms to be cloaked in academic gravitas, their subjects examined with intense rigour, but clearly a lot of what gets called 'research' by artists is indiscernible from geeking out. Part of what De Certeau explains is that canonized scholarly readings often dictate fixed meanings. Being a fan or an artist, and not an academic, allows room to be productively wrong in ways that offer greater surprise than if they were correct.

A range of artists working now – including Justin Beal, Pam Lins, Erin Shirreff and Jennifer West – operate as both fans and revisionists. West's practice is exemplary in conflating fandom with research. Like the *nouvelle vague* directors' use of their Hollywood predecessors' ideas to develop a new aesthetic, West's cinephilic research into the history of structuralist and handmade films has allowed her to put new energy into the old experiments. West revitalizes strategies of artists such as Len Lye and Tony Conrad – a declared hero of hers – by injecting them with a feminist ethos and documenting her own life. She turns the movie remake into something more like a Fluxus instruction work by re-staging actions and by placing her go-go-boot-wearing self in male video artists' shoes.

Dianna Molzan makes a partial use of the fan model by reimagining gestures of traumatic pathos in the works of action painters like Otto Muehl or Shozo Shimamoto as follies and ornaments. Holes cut in paintings, often seen as metaphorical fleshy wounds,¹⁰ become fishnets or cow necks in Molzan's versions. She laughs off the seriousness of canonical interpretation while liberating an old method from its prescribed uses in a move that is totally imaginative.

In a review of the MoMA exhibition 'The Forever Now', in which Molzan was included, artist David Salle argues that the plastic arts have always relied on building on the past through combination and modification.¹¹ He's right. Even in the 1920s, Heinrich Wölfflin knew that pictures relied more on other pictures than on reality, but something has shifted. The expanded field of art now has a history deep enough to dig into. As memory is increasingly outsourced

to electronic devices, everything becomes an image or a text the moment it occurs. What's proposed by Shaw's work – that in one's mind a thing and a picture are interchangeable – becomes ubiquitous. Rather than the politically blank recombination of forms seen in pastiche, or the negating critique of appropriation, current art has the opportunity to imagine a more interesting, complex version of its own past by misreading it.

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Art in America

SARAH CROWNER ON ALBERTO BURRI

by Sarah Crowner

As part of the Annual Guide to Galleries, Museums and Artists (A.i.A.'s August issue), we preview the 2014-15 season of museum exhibitions worldwide. In addition to offering their own top picks, our editors asked select artists, curators and collectors to identify the shows they are looking forward to. Here, artist Sarah Crowner talks about Alberto Burri.

“Although I’ve never had a chance to see Alberto Burri’s work in person, I know that it needs to be experienced with your full body. That’s how it reveals its spirit. Because the pieces are cut, burned, torched and stitched, they are clearly not images, they’re objects. It’s the kind of art that will grow and expand as you approach it physically. I feel that’s important to my work, too. It may seem very flat and image-conscious from afar, but, as you get closer, you realize that it’s a construction of parts stitched and joined together.

“When I think about Burri I’m reminded of Claes Oldenburg’s street works from the early 1950s, which were also made out of burlap and were cut and burned. When I worked as Oldenburg’s studio manager in the early 2000s, I was taken by his concept of finding what you see [on the street] and making a painting, which Burri also did. This is a very expansive attitude. If you consider what was happening in Europe and New York in the late 1950s, you can see that there were lots of crossovers, even in the age before the Internet. Oldenburg and Burri didn’t know each other but were both using burlap and not calling the results paintings but ‘art.’ Yves Klein was blowtorching and so was Burri. There was something in the air.”

“Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting,” Guggenheim Museum, New York, Oct. 9, 2015-Jan. 6, 2016.

Image: Alberto Burri: *Legno e bianco I (Wood and White I)*, 1956, wood veneer, combustion, acrylic and polymer on canvas, 34½ by 62 inches. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. © Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città di Castello / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Sarah Crowner is an artist based in New York.



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NEWYORKOBSERVER

Chelsea Art Show Blurs Lines Between Two and Three Dimensions

By Hailey Cunningham | 06/05/15 10:55am

On two floors of a Chelsea tower, the exhibition space FLAG Art Foundation opened its newest show “Space Between” this week.

Most summer group shows are fairly sleepy, either space-fillers or opportunities to experiment, with all the curatorial erraticness that implies. This one offers works by a roster of superstars, old and new: Douglas Coupland, Thomas Demand, Liam Gillick, Mark Grotjahn, Andreas Gursky, Agnes Martin, etc. The signature piece, and the one that inspired the title, is a blue and green superimposed canvas by Ellsworth Kelly.

The unusual and fresh exhibit plays with the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional spaces—stacked canvases create shadows, objects protrude from the walls and one work even dangles from the ceiling in the entranceway. This approach to curating makes for an exhibit that surprises at every turn, but makes it difficult to label an artwork “painting” or “sculpture” or “sculptural painting” or “painted sculpture.”

Curated by Louis Grachos, who is director of the Contemporary Austin, in Texas, and for years helmed the Albright-Know Museum in Buffalo, NY, and Stephanie Roach, FLAG’s well-known director, the show is meant to explore multiple generations of contemporary artists’ radical abstraction. Non-profit FLAG is meant to act as an educational space, teaching and encouraging a diverse audience to appreciate contemporary art.

And this show does exactly that, combining artists of a variety of ages, working in a variety of mediums.

Olafur Eliasson’s *Walk Through Wall* (2005) acts as the focal point for the upstairs gallery space. Reminiscent of Michelangelo Pistoletto’s mirror paintings from the ’60s, this framed spiraling double mirror plays with space and dimensions while interacting with the viewer. However, as the young gallery hoppers meandered upstairs, it quickly became little more than “selfie station.”

The brilliant pink canvas in Kaz Oshiro’s *Untitled Still Life* (2013) straddles the corner, playfully subverting traditional white-wall gallery presentation.

And in *Sliced Snake* and *Hook Swan*, artist Sarah Crowner cuts up and sews her canvases back together. She appropriates the traditionally female act of sewing, exploring the history of the craft.

The exhibition will on view at The FLAG Art Foundation’s gallery at 545 West 25th Street through August 14.

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Repetition and Difference
The Jewish Museum, New York
March 13 - August 9, 2015

The notions of difference and repetition have been part of philosophy and art practices for thousands of years. Artists have commonly employed repetition – the creation of artworks in series or the making of multiples and copies – in their work for a variety of reasons, ranging from the commercial to the subversive. Yet, crucial differences are often embedded within the process of iteration. Repetition and Difference brings together objects from the Museum’s collection and works by contemporary artists that examine how differences and derivations can reveal significant meaning. The exhibition is titled after Gilles Deleuze’s seminal text *Difference and Repetition*, first published in French in 1968, a landmark book that fundamentally questioned concepts of identity and representation to propose how multiplicity replaces the ideas of essence, substance and possibility.

Repetition and Difference artists:

Walead Beshty
Sarah Crowner
Abraham Cruzvillegas
N. Dash
John Houck
Koo Jeong A
Kris Martin
Amalia Pica
Hank Willis Thomas

Repetition and Difference is curated by Susan L. Braunstein, Henry J. Leir Curator, and Jens Hoffmann, Deputy Director, Exhibitions and Public Programs, with Daniel S. Palmer, Leon Levy Assistant Curator.

Repetition and Difference is generously supported by the Jewish Museum Centennial Exhibition Fund, the Barbara S. Horowitz Contemporary Art Fund, and the Joan Rosenbaum Exhibition Fund.

Additional support is provided by the Leir Charitable Foundations and the Leon Levy Foundation.

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Boston



Everyday Objects Become ‘Conversation Pieces’ at the MFA

A new exhibit invites visitors to engage with strangers using a quirky messaging app, watch performances by the Boston Ballet, and more.

By Olga Khvan | Arts & Entertainment | October 15, 2014

Beginning Wednesday evening, visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts can witness a monthly conversation take place between art and the human body.

Every third Wednesday through February, the museum will host two back-to-back performances by Boston Ballet II dancers, choreographed by principal dancer Yury Yanowsky, in front of “Curtains (Vidas perfectas)” by Sarah Cwoner. The Brooklyn-based artist invites the presence of the human body into the creation of the piece, sewing together the collage of linens with her own hands, and then extends it by inviting dancers to use it as a backdrop for performances.

When MFA curator Liz Munsell chose to feature “Curtains” in “Conversation Piece,” a new exhibit that opened Friday in the Cohen Galleria of the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art, the idea to invite the Boston Ballet to collaborate was a no-brainer.

“This is a world-class museum. We exhibit the best of the best artwork, so we wanted to get the best of the best dance as well, and that’s why we went to the Boston Ballet,” she said. “Sarah really gave Yury the freedom to be able to do his work in an environment that’s new to him and to see what might come out of that. You pick collaborators that you know do amazing work, and then you let them go with their vision.”

The interdisciplinary collaboration between Crouner and Yanowsky is just one of the conversations in the new exhibition.

“Colloquium,” a marble sculpture by Pedro Reyes consisting of interlocking panels cut into the shape of blank speech bubbles, will serve as the centerpiece for a series of roundtable discussions organized in collaboration with Harvard’s Cultural Agents Initiative.

“It’s a sculpture that references a Noguchi coffee table, which is a modernist design that tends to be one of the more harmonious examples of combining form and function. But instead of making a regular platform for coffee and books, [Reyes] takes the platforms and cuts them in the shape of speech bubbles and creates a dynamic conversation in space that’s a platform for dialogue, not just a platform for objects,” Munsell said. “You realize right away that this piece is asking you to speak to it, and through it, and about it.”

While walking through the exhibit, Munsell also invites visitors to sit on plywood chairs by local artist Andrew Witkin, abandoning the usual “no-touching” approach associated with museums.

“Andrew Witkin makes us think about a chair as an art object, makes us think about how a chair can be a beautiful thing for our eyes to feast upon, and makes us think about how the placement of the chair affects the way we see a painting,” she said. “The whole exhibition is really kind of about people using objects in more creative ways—thinking about how we’re programmed to use them a certain way and breaking out of that.”

The idea of subverting the way we use everyday objects comes through especially well with the inclusion of “Somebody,” a mobile app by artist, writer, and filmmaker Miranda July that invites users to choose proxies to deliver messages to their friends face-to-face. The MFA is a hotspot for the app, and Munsell treats it as an artwork in the exhibition, hanging a museum label for it on the wall just as with all the other pieces.

By sparking conversation using the app, dance performances, and roundtable discussions, Munsell reinforces the original vision of the Cohen Galleria, which stands apart from the rest of the museum’s more conventional white-box galleries, as a highly social space within the MFA.

“I want people to feel like it’s their space, and they can hang out and come and sit in the Andrew Witkin chairs and watch the television piece and watch the dance performance,” she said. “Certain environments that are more formal don’t necessarily lend themselves to those kinds of open interactions just because of how they’re structured, but this gallery has such a vibrant feeling to it, and I wanted to create an exhibition that would speak to that and also encourage dialogue even further through the art.”

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Miranda July's Somebody app strikes up 'Conversation' at MFA

By Michael Andor Brodeur | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 9, 2014

To writer, artist, and filmmaker Miranda July — perhaps best known for the profoundly tender quirk of such films as “Me and You and Everyone We Know” (2005) and “The Future” (2011) — we may all be stuck on the grid, but that doesn't mean we can't defy its lines.

“Maybe,” she says over the phone from Los Angeles in the middle of a haircut, “as time has gone on, I've gotten a little bit more questioning of technology, trying to figure out what is missing. . . . It ends up having such a huge impact on my life, every second of it. It seems only responsible to at least try and think about ‘What do I want? Is it maybe slightly different from what's being given to me?’”

July's pursuit of the perpetually cloudy business of what we want and her predilection for the “slightly different” have served as animating forces in her work across many disciplines. Her latest offering is an iPhone messaging app called Somebody, which allows users to send scripted messages to friends through the unlikely amateur actors of nearby strangers. (“Somebody” also serves as the title for an accompanying short film, visible on YouTube, that imagines various characters connecting through the app, including a particularly assertive potted plant.)

On Friday, Somebody becomes the first app to be included in an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, as the group show “Conversation Piece” turns the virtual space of the museum into a five-month hot spot, allowing a renownedly chilly city an entire winter to break the ice.

As with most of July's creations, the simplicity of Somebody is a front for its complexity. It resembles other messaging apps in that users select a friend to message from a list of contacts, but rather than provide a direct channel, the app offers a selection of other Somebody users in the immediate area of the intended recipient. Once the chosen stranger accepts responsibility for delivering the message (and the recipient confirms that now is a good time to be approached), the search begins. Equipped with a GPS map, a photo of the recipient, and a script of the message (complete with stage directions), this proximal proxy seeks out the target and performs the message, hopefully with enough aplomb to earn a good star rating.

July likens Somebody to a preexisting model for asking complete strangers to embody your message: the singing telegram. But by exploding the directness and privacy we've come to expect from our texting experiences, Somebody's true purpose reveals itself.

“A few people have told me you end up having, like, five more interactions just to find the person,” she says. “And that's part of the fun.” Photos and stories from various users are posted to a Tumblr that July maintains.

It took July about four months of collaboration with the New York production agency Stinkdigital to build the app, and she's using its approximately 60,000 users as a testing group, making tweaks and working out kinks.

pp development may seem an unlikely venture for an artist whose practice has involved soliciting members of the public to take flash photos of the dusty realms beneath their beds (assignment #50 out of the 70 in her participatory work “Learning to Love You More”) or conducting interviews with the mysterious classified advertisers from the PennySaver (as she did for the book “It Chooses You”).

But the notion of technology binding and blinding us to one another has been a constant investigation in her work, from the surreal surveillance of herself she performed in the early video “The Amateurist” (1998), to the strange emotions (and stranger emoticons) that sprang from the chat rooms in “Me and You and Everyone We Know.”

“I’m addicted to my phone, but it doesn’t bring me joy,” July says. “But what does bring me joy? These fleeting interactions with strangers. Could I perversely try and make that happen in a kind of openly inefficient way? Could I do something that’s almost kind of wrong for a phone on a phone?”

For MFA assistant curator of contemporary art Liz Munsell, Somebody’s reliance on the participation of other people for its success (both as app and as art) is what makes it such a good fit for “Conversation Piece.”

“I’ll be honest, there were some people who said to me, ‘Oh that’s creepy, I wouldn’t download that,’” says Munsell, who curated “Conversation Piece” in part to give its open-gallery setting in the museum’s Linde Wing a shot of social activation. “But in general, I think that people are so bored with the state of social media and our little iPhone bubbles. I think people are willing, especially in the safe environment of the MFA, to break out of their shells a little bit.”

Taking its name from a form of 18th-century group portraiture distinguished by its domestic, informal intimacy, “Conversation Piece” also features multidisciplinary work from artists including Sarah Crowner, Pedro Reyes, María José Arjona, Jaime Davidovich, and Andrew Witkin. “What I wanted to do was create a contemporary conversation piece,” says Munsell, “With a table, with a chair, with a curtain — but also with people, the visitors being the subjects, and the protagonists of this conversation piece.”

Extending the metaphor to actual audience engagement was paramount to Munsell, as was boosting the presence of performance in the MFA’s galleries. On the third Wednesday of each month through February, there will be a Yury Yanowsky-choreographed performance by Boston Ballet II dancers staged in front of Crowner’s “Curtains (*Vias perfectas*)” — itself a dialogue between hard modernist lines and hand-sewn craft. And Reyes’s “Colloquium” — an array of marble question bubbles that Munsell describes as “a Noguchi coffee table exploded in space” — will play milieu to a series of roundtable discussions organized in collaboration with Harvard University’s Cultural Agents Initiative.

“[July] really knows what she’s doing in terms of anticipating but also pushing dynamics to new levels,” says Munsell. “I think that really comes through in the app.”

In hosting a Somebody hot spot, the MFA joins several institutions around the world including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Venice Film Festival, and The New Museum. Users can create their own hot spots (at universities or large events) using a kit posted to the Somebody website.

July will also appear at the MFA on April 15 and 16 to deliver one of the museum’s Shapiro Lectures, reading from her first novel, due out in January, “The First Bad Man” — a project that July describes as a relief: “There’s no customer support; you’re on your own. If you don’t like it, I don’t have to fix it,” she says, laughing.

And while there remain a few bugs to address, the grander inefficiency of Somebody is key. It’s yet one more of July’s longtime fascinations: the wonder to be found in the imperfect, the real.

“It is interesting walking that line between ineffective or not valuable, or just a different kind of value,” she says. “It’s valuable because it sends you back out into life. It keeps you alive in the moment and engaged with the world rather than keeping you in your phone.”

I can attest that early adoption is well underway in Boston. While picking up takeout pho, a woman approached me at the counter with a caution I could sense her actively disarming. “Are you Michael?” she asked, and I nodded yes.

“I was supposed to give you a Somebody message last week, but I couldn’t find you, so I don’t know what it was or who it was from. You were near the church, so I looked there, but you definitely weren’t there.” I wasn’t in either of the shops she peeked into, either.

I regretted that I’d missed that connection with Jessie, in an undetermined place, receiving an unknown message through an unfamiliar person from an undisclosed source. But at the same time I was happy her search was over. She’d remembered my face, she was relieved to find me, and it felt nice to be found. For a few moments, I was in a Miranda July film.

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The New York Times

July 24, 2014

Clash of the Items, at a Gallery Near You

Exhibitions at Sean Kelly, Pavel Zoubok and Salon 94

By Roberta Smith



Heterogeneity and lots of it is trending among the summer's group shows. The mingling of like with extremely unlike is an increasingly popular curatorial approach, as is arranging them in dense installations. In numerous galleries, works of all mediums, artifacts, and objects of design and craft keep company, often at the behest of outside curators. Different time periods are spanned, disparate cultures contrasted, with all kinds of surprises.

At the Jason McCoy Gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan, Stephanie Buhmann, its director, and Samantha McCoy, its gallery manager, have organized "Domesticity," which begins with Louis Comfort Tiffany glass and Charles Burchfield wallpaper and ends in the vicinity of contemporary art and design. In Chelsea, the Andrew Edlin Gallery is presenting a cornucopia of art that qualifies as insider, outsider and somewhere in between, assembled by the artist Sam Gordon. And in "Machinery for Living," the excellent show organized by the artist Walead Beshty at Petzel, also in Chelsea, supplements a central, but varied core of photography with drawings, sculptures, fashion and furniture to create an elaborate portrayal of modernity. But three shows in particular have, each in its own way, revved things up to a dizzying degree.

SEAN KELLY GALLERY

At Sean Kelly, the show "From Pre-History to Post-Everything" accomplishes this not so much by filling space as by arcing back through time to connect the distant past and the present. It has been organized by Janine Cirincione, one of the gallery's directors, who has juxtaposed abstract art by 10 contemporary painters with a large selection of drop-dead-gorgeous ceremonial antiquities, mostly Neolithic Period and Shang dynasty carved jade from China, and pre-Columbian, sometimes Neolithic carved stone from Latin America.

These pieces are seen here in unusual abundance, and are different from those in most in New York museums. (They're also not behind glass.) The sheer variety of the jade itself can induce lightheadedness, especially the color, veining and textures of a series of Chinese ceremonial bi-discs, flat glass-smooth circles with holes in their centers. Some are so thin light shines through, especially a small one where black is heavily flecked with salmon pink. While their use remains mysterious, it is easy to grasp their visual power and exaltation of nature. Equally enthralling are three carved-stone ritual blades from the Valdivia culture of Ecuador (3500 to 1800 B.C.), whose delicate silhouettes evoke shields, faces and figures, and are enhanced by subtly curved surfaces. There is much more to be studied — Shang blades incised with demonic faces and Taíno grooved stone balls from the Caribbean — in the altogether transformative display.

It may be too much to ask young artists to compete with material of this age and quality, and most of their paintings, while sometimes attractive, fade decorously to the background. They variously reflect the latest ticks of current abstraction: employing unusual materials (joint compound on Sheetrock) or making white monochrome paintings as if Robert Ryman never existed, or worse, working with gestural abandon as if Lyrical Abstraction never did either. Sarah Crowner's taut, hard-edge geometric shapes (painted and sewn together) fight back with their own kind of physical perfection, as do the simple poured compositions of Landon Metz. And Patricia Treib's shapes — sleek in outline but generated by vigorous brushwork — benefit from the company. It's unfortunate that Ms. Crowner and Ms. Treib are represented by only one painting each.

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ARTFORUM

April 2014

Sarah Crowner Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

For her first exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene, held in 2009, Sarah Crowner juxtaposed two bodies of work: a series of unglazed ceramic vessels and a group of “paintings” sewn together from remnants of discarded fabric. Both revealed a distinctive handmade quality. The former featured mottled surfaces, gently misshapen necks, and generally uneven forms, while the latter betray imperfections of alignment that open up pockets of space, holes amid the just-mismatched seams. Those paintings, with their insistent tactility and crisp, high-keyed geometric designs—they broadly referenced the fabric works of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Blinky Palermo, among others, and were sometimes directly appropriated from specific compositions—presaged the artist’s subsequent production. So, too, did the pots set the tone for more recent developments: the ceramics lacked bottoms, and were therefore nonfunctional. There is use and then there is use under the sign of the exhibition, and underscoring this distinction seems to be very much the thrust of Crowner’s project.

Crowner’s recent show “The Wave,” her third at this gallery, was built around a shimmering turquoise parquet, a mosaic of glazed terra-cotta tiles set into a pattern by Josef Hoffmann. Elevated as a false floor, it became at once a stage and a kind of purposeful abstraction, along the lines of Wade Guyton’s 2007 intervention at Petzel Gallery, where he laid down a black plywood floor, or Jorge Pardo’s long-term project at Dia’s old space in Chelsea, installed in 2000, for which he paved the lobby and bookstore in sunny ceramic blocks. (In fact, Crowner had the tiles fabricated at the same studio in Guadalajara, Mexico, where Pardo had his turned out for Dia.) A group of paintings lined the perimeter of Crowner’s tiled surface—five panels hung on the adjacent walls and two were supported by freestanding structures—and to see them, viewers had to step up onto the raised area. Together, the paintings and the floor effectively constituted a room within the larger container of space, yet while Crowner evidently conceived of the installation as a cohesive entity, she refused the illusionism (as much as the illusion of totality) that is the



View of “Sarah Crowner,” 2014. Wall: The Wave (Flame), 2014. Floor: Platform, Hot Blue Terracotta, 2014.

Gesamtkunstwerk. Viewers could step off the platform at the far side of the entrance, only to turn around and see the backs of the two unattached paintings, strings hanging, easel armatures foregrounded, looming like unseemly, naked totems.

Like the material distinctions—of color, sheen, and edge—between the various tiles, the paintings, too, contain leftovers from the process of construction. And, like the platform, they were produced part by part, from different elements put together to create a quilt-like whole. Most involve large sheets of hot-red and orange fabric cut into squiggles and stitched to raw canvas fields, while a painted pair features a fragment of a 1970s textile design by interior designer Alexander Girard—the motif of a silhouetted hand holding a spray of leaves and flowers—which Crowner has mirrored and cropped. Here, the body—suggested in the anthropomorphism of the standing paintings-cum-sculptures—is pictured rather than implied, which has the

effect of making its absence more profound.

Our presence moving across the artist's tiled ground registers as compensatory, perhaps even urgent. Not surprisingly, at the end of 2010, Crowner asserted that she felt her paintings, if enlarged, might serve as the backdrop for a performance. This was an interesting idea, one that Crowner in fact executed when she created the set for a Robert Ashley opera put on at the Serpentine Gallery in 2012. There will, no doubt, be many similar projects to come. Still, I find myself rooting for Crowner to continue to work in the manner demonstrated in this recent show. It remains powerfully in the present tense, and, rather than holding out for actions in the future, relishes the uncertainty and complexity of interactions generated by its own design.

—Suzanne Hudson

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GalleristNY

Sarah Crowner: 'The Wave' at Nicelle Beauchene

By ANDREW RUSSETH

January 15, 2014

Sarah Crowner has knocked it out of the park with her third show at Beauchene. She has once again made a series of rectangular paintings by sewing together a few irregularly shaped slices of canvas, some raw, some painted searing shades of red, orange or yellow, their brush marks just barely visible when you get up close to them. As opposed to many of her past works, though, which were all about the sharp angle, often implying theater sets through abstraction, these new pieces have undulating waves gliding across them. Their forms are simpler than in the past, which makes them even more potent.

The gallery floor is also an artwork, made from more than 1,200 terracotta tiles Ms. Crowner has colored cerulean, Bondi blue and dozens of other electrifying shades of blue-green. It glows. Finely polished, it reflects the surrounding paintings and invites you to see them as spare, luxurious décor or as parts of a full installation or even as sculptural objects. (Two are held on freestanding wooden easels so that you can walk around them and take in the matter-of-fact stitching that is behind their interlocked magic.) It would make a superb floor for a tony dance club or a forward thinking church or certainly a museum—really any setting looking to promote a sumptuous, ritualistic and thoroughly confident mode of conviviality.

In recent years, reductionist abstraction has become an easily salable, easily digested default mode for emerging painters, but Ms. Crowner is one of the rare few who manages to keep it interesting. Hers is an art about intimacy (of viewing and of making), exemplifying how minute decisions (a stitch, a stroke) can over time yield dazzling effects.

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The New York Times

Sarah Crowner: 'The Wave'

January 9, 2014

Art in Review

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery
327 Broome Street, between Bowery and Chrystie Street | Lower East Side
Through Feb. 2

Sarah Crowner's third solo at Nicelle Beauchene is just what's needed in the dark days of January: an eye-opening mood-lifter of a show and a gentle nudge to the hibernating intellect.

Installed as a room-within-a-room, it displays Ms. Crowner's signature sewn abstractions, stitched together from painted canvas, around a tiled viewing platform that's her most impressive foray yet into ceramics. (Her first show at the gallery was titled "Paintings and Pots" and included clusters of simple white vessels.) Most of the paintings feature wide undulating stripes of red and orange, making them an excellent foil for the turquoise chevrons of the platform.

As before, Ms. Crowner is using non-painterly methods to make works that nonetheless register as paintings. But she's also integrating different periods of 20th-century design. The vaguely Scandinavian wave forms in the paintings, reminiscent of vintage textiles by the Finnish company Marimekko, meet the Wiener Werkstätte herringbone pattern of the tile floor. And two canvases directly quote the midcentury work of Alexander Girard; they are painted rather than sewn and show silhouetted white hands holding sprigs of leaves and flowers against gray-blue backgrounds.

It's a fashionable mix, and, at times, the whole installation veers perilously close to "decorator art." But the theatrical setup makes a difference; the platform doesn't cover the whole floor, and the fourth wall is formed by paintings on stands. In the end, you trust that Ms. Crowner wants to turn tasteful design elements into unpredictable actors.

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frieze

FRIEZE no. 157 SEPTEMBER 2013

LARRY BELL & SARAH CROWNER, MEET MARLOW MOSS Kunstverein, Amsterdam

My maths teacher's favourite T-shirt bore an image of Piet Mondrian's *Composition With Four Yellow Lines* (1933). The right angles of the yellow square, rounded on his bulging stomach, accentuated the deepening ochre pools around his armpits. I'm not quite sure what it was that I was trying to revive from that period (the 1980s), but I recently bought a cardboard box of Kleenex tissues that mimicked Mondrian's abstract paintings. Where the folded cardboard failed to make the lines meet, a new formal and mental space was created: there was room for uncertainty in this disturbed pattern – a breath of fresh air in the original Modernist grid.

It is this space that I recognize in the work of the American artist Sarah Crowner. Her paintings have a bold, mimicking quality to them, in which Modernist patterns and convictions are quoted, transformed and even shattered. Looking at her new work installed at Kunstverein in Amsterdam, redecorated for the occasion with electric blue carpeting, I was unsure if I was looking at a painting or at a reference. It was this tight space of uncertainty that gave weight to the work.

For this exhibition, Crowner chose to show her work in the context of another American artist, Larry Bell, along with an additional insert to the show called 'Meet Marlow Moss', which introduced the work and biography of the eccentric painter, marginalized figure and Mondrian disciple Marjorie Jewel Moss, who died in 1958. Each piece reflected on the next. Crowner selected works from a recent series by Bell, whose biography in the show's press release reads like a sci-fi novel: 'Larry Bell walked around Venice, California in the early sixties with a camera attached to his back, a bio-feedback chip in his hat and a trigger mechanism connected to his earlobes. Alpha waves emitted by a body in a state of wellbeing would set off the photo-taking process and eventually lead to a series of blurred pictures capturing perception on the move, observation in its most random form.' Most striking was Bell's *SF 3.9.12* (2012) an image of a torn, curling mass whose origin could only be guessed at, but was reminiscent of the earliest daguerreotypes – wild experiments into the nature of light and



'Larry Bell & Sarah Crowner, Meet Marlow Moss', 2013, installation view

how to capture its behaviour on paper. Similar works from this series stem from pure curiosity about natural phenomena, and seem agitated in their positioning against the Modernist tradition. In the company of Crowner's paintings, Bell's work is revealed to be explicitly non-painting – colours are created through light instead. If not for the paint or lack of it, however, it would have been hard to distinguish whose work belonged to whom, as both Crowner's and Bell's creations share a luminous quality in ideas and in surface treatment.

Crowner placed her *Corner Painting for Larry* (2013), a diptych suggestive of a huge empty room or cube (after Bell's cube sculptures from the 1960s) on either side of a corner in the narrow space of Kunstverein. The work was also said to reference that of Moss. According to Lucy Howarth, quoted on the gallery's website: 'Moss disrupts and subverts the narratives that could include her. This resistance to categorisation is a large factor in Moss's obscurity; she is omitted from the histories, because she does not fit in. To date she is most consistently approached in reference to Mondrian, a context that casts her in the role of follower, or worse: imitator, a role that's far beneath her.' Even if these references could not be exactly traced, their mere suggestion attached a string to the histories of artists that come to life through Crowner's work, however constructed their reality may seem.

Moss's paintings, only one of which was included in the exhibition, are so like those of Mondrian that the originality of both becomes questionable. Of all the certainties that I have ever questioned, the artistic originality of Mondrian was not one of them. In this way, Crowner's work and its staging beside Bell's and Moss's was an unabashed celebration of originality, tribute and mimicry.

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PAINTER PAINTER

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Jonathan Thomas

frieze

No. 156 Summer
2013



Painter painter on the wall, who is the fairest of them all? It's been more than a decade since the Walker Art Center devoted a group exhibition to contemporary painting. That previous endeavour, 'Painting at the Edge of the World', curated by Douglas Fogle in 2001, brought together artists from ten different countries in order to examine the medium's dispersion as a logic into adjacent practices, such as performance and video. By contrast, 'Painter Painter', curated by Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan, moved in the opposite direction, highlighting a group of mostly American artists: a generation of studio-based painters who reveal 'a fascination for the medium's many histories'. As the echoing title indicates, this was an exhibition characterized by repetition and reactivation; the primary focus was on the persistence of formal abstraction. In other words, the concern was with painting about painting, about methods and materials and process; as one of the curators noted: 'We've brought together works that are stained, rubbed, torn, collaged, sprayed, frayed, printed, stitched, glued, smeared, stretched, and so on.' To be sure, some formidable works were on display. But the overall atmosphere, while elegant, was also rather tepid.

The exhibition opened with a triptych of zigzagging compositions by Sarah Cwoner. Composed of linen, coloured fabric and canvas both painted and raw, all cut and stitched together like a collage, the work called to mind the lineage of hard-edge geometric abstraction, from Theo van Doesburg and Sonia Delaunay to postwar figures like Lygia Clark. Cwoner is open about her interest in using art history as a medium, as a score that can be reinterpreted and performed, or applied as a backdrop – as she puts it – for other theatrical activities. But if we were invited to approach 'Painter Painter' on those terms, as potential theatre, the question remains: where was the conflict? That, in short, was my beef. With minor exceptions – notably Molly Zuckerman-Hartung's installation, which bucks the status quo with a scene of bondage, like an art crime – there was little dissonance to be found. In light of the more pressing abstraction of financialization – indeed of the abstraction of everyday life that inflects the social context in which all of us are working, albeit unequally – one has to ask: why play it safe? If abstraction originated as a break with tradition, why do we keep turning it into one?

Given the limited gallery space and the inclusion of 15 artists, it was surprising that one of them, Matt Connors, had works in almost every room. At his best, Connors demonstrated what colour can do – how it can affect boundaries or lines with its physical properties, or produce optical effects, as seen in the chromatic shadows that bounce off two of his paintings with a touch of abracadabra. On the other hand, the two large-scale monochromatic inkjet prints that he rolled into tubes and stood on end as sculptures, came across as confectionary distractions, particularly when placed in proximity to the subtler palette of an artist like Zak Prekop. Prekop's sole contribution, *Untitled Transparency* (2012), is a large canvas that we are led to read through, as the title suggests: large portions of his oil and paper composition were painted from behind, so that colour was hushed, like a whisper.

Perpendicular to Prekop's work, Lesley Vance's trio of modestly-scaled paintings were among the more impressive pieces on display. With their virtuosic swerves, her sinuous forms tend to slice to and fro, as if projecting and receding into space simultaneously. In their details, ripe with painterly incident, each piece offered an adventure for perception. Another highlight was Alex Olson, who analyzes the time-tested language of mark-making. Along the lines of the Supports/Surfaces movement, though emphasizing surface over support, Olson takes painting's grammar, its lexicon, as her primary subject matter. Laying bare a disjunction in texture between figure and ground, she elevates painterly structure to image. The architecture of mark-making is narrativized. On the other hand, Scott Olson (no relation) contributes something more alchemic: applying naturally derived pigments to marble dust panels, his works seemed to conjure the ghosts of art history – Kandinsky, Paul Klee – while pitting spontaneity and fluidity against the force of the frame.

Framing, ultimately, is what I had issue with. To its credit, Crosby and Ryan's exhibition brought together a crew of talented painters – painter's painters, really – all of whom, for the record, happen to be white. While it situates their practices in terms of a generational impulse – all of the artists bar one were born in the 1970s – it does not go on to ask why. Why abstraction yet again? Why now? What, socially or politically or economically, is determining this fascination?

Recent years have shown us some ways in which abstraction can maintain its critical edge, for instance with the money paintings and tablecloths by Reena Spaulings. But when the legacy of abstraction has been unhinged from its attachment to social transformation, when it is reduced to pure style, self-reflexive but not self-critical, we should take pause to consider the values we produce in celebrating it.

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ARTFORUM

“Painter Painter”

Walker Art Center

Modesty is not a word commonly associated with the history of abstraction, but in this exhibition, curators Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan have gathered work by a group of up-and-coming artists—nearly all born in the 1970s—who largely eschew grand gestures, illuminating their own painterly processes in a manner so humble that it sometimes borders on self-deprecation. In Charles Mayton’s diptych *Blind Ventriloquist*, 2012, for example, a rough roller-made painting is paired with a more delicately painted canvas that’s almost entirely obscured by a stained rag and a silkscreened image of the artist’s accidentally painted studio wall. In *We lead healthy lives to keep filthy minds*, 2013, the multimedia artist Jay Heikes shows an eclectic wall-mounted array of sculpted tools—sticks, paddles, scrapers—that might conceivably have been used for the application of paint in his studio, though in this piece they weren’t.

Other objects—treated somewhat more violently—also appear in *The Failure of Contingency*, 2012, by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, in which a long spaghetti-cut drop cloth is strewn over the floor, with one end culminating in a matte black globe under two foldable chairs. Part of the globe’s northern hemisphere has been scalped, and its convex skin is incorporated in an entirely different work (*The Impossible*, 2012) installed on a nearby wall. Here, the radial detritus of one work becomes the genesis of another.

While most of the pieces in this show suggest an inward (or even downward) gaze, the work of Sarah Crouner is an exception. The boldly colored blocks of canvas in *Ciseaux Rideaux*, 2012, were stitched together by the artist in a manner that takes inspiration both in method and in composition from the worlds of fashion and design. Crouner implicitly suggests that an occasional glance beyond the confines of the studio walls is liberating and does painters—and painting—a world of good.

—Jay Gabler

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WALKER

Painter, Painter

Curated by Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

February 2, 2013 – October 27, 2013

At a time when artists may work without obligation to medium, why choose the materials of painting? What does it mean for an artist to assume the role of painter today? And just what is at stake for a new generation committed to painting?

Painter Painter presents new work by 15 artists from the US and Europe in a focused survey of emergent developments in abstract painting and studio practice. With an expanded series of public programs, it also considers the ever-shifting role of the painter in contemporary art and culture, which remains as fluid as the medium itself.

The exhibition posits abstract painting today as a means, not an end. For these artists, painting is a generative process—one that is rooted in the studio yet open and receptive to the world. Here new languages of abstraction and eccentric methods of making are freely pursued, crossing paths with sculpture, poetry, film, music, performance, design, publishing, craft, and fashion. Thus painting becomes a conduit—a way to make contact beyond the closed frame of their formal invention.

The Walker's first group painting show in more than a decade, the exhibition features Matt Connors, Sarah Crowner, Fergus Feehily, Jay Heikes, Rosy Keyser, Charles Mayton, Dianna Molzan, Joseph Montgomery, Katy Moran, Alex Olson, Scott Olson, Zak Prekop, Dominik Sittig, Lesley Vance, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

As a complement to the exhibition, a series of studio visits with the artists offers an open-ended look at their interests and working methods. The online Studio Sessions—a collection of dialogues, texts, and visual essays—are as varied in approach as the work of the artists themselves.

Exhibition co-curators: Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan

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frieze

Issue 145 March 2012

American Opera

Dan Fox



'These are songs about the Corn Belt, and some of the people in it ... or on it.'¹ That's what the man in the Perfect Lives Lounge says as you sit down with your drink, served in 'a fluted plastic glass, sans ice'. Maybe he says it in Spanish, but you're not sure. After all, even if you don't speak a language, you can catch its drift if it's sung.

The Perfect Lives Lounge – let's just call it The Bar – is sparse, but elegantly decorated. Colour scheme: hints of neon against inky black infinitude, here and there a blush of pink and baby blue. Seven vertical neon strips form The Bar's sign. As your eyes adjust to the light, everything looks soft-edged, like a 1980s video or television broadcast, occasionally flecked with static. Come to think of it, from a certain angle, The Bar looks like a television studio set. Exact dimensions are uncertain; windows between interior and exterior dissolve rhythmically into one another. The man – Corn Belt Guy – is standing in the middle of the room. He has a full head of fine white hair, dusted with glitter, which is neatly parted down one side. His lips shine with gloss. He wears big tan-tinted glasses. Round his neck hangs a dapper navy blue scarf, smoothed neatly onto the lapels of his grey silk suit. Occasionally he swaps the scarf for an orange or pink number. A red light-bulb hanging from the ceiling hovers right next to his face. He looks debonair, although perhaps sleazy from some angles. The music in the bar has a Latin swing – simple drum-machine rhythms with soft jazzy chords from a piano drifting over the top. You order another round from Rodney, the Bartender, who looks a lot like Corn Belt Guy. 'He says, right off, we don't serve fine wine in half-pints, buddy.'

In The Bar, Corn Belt – we must stop calling him that now – is better known as Raoul de Noget, or 'R'. 'R' is a singer and he's here with his friend Buddy, 'The World's Greatest Piano Player'. They're supposed to be taking the day off from making music, but that was Buddy you heard teasing out those soft, jazzy chords earlier. Check out his look: black fedora, shades, royal blue shirt with blousy sleeves garlanded in rhinestones. There's a ring with a big ruby rock on his little finger and constellations of sequins stuck on his hands – and it's mostly his hands we're interested in looking at. Now he's ripping up that keyboard with explosive boogie-woogie improvisations, playing like he's ... 'The World's Greatest Piano Player'. Rodney reminds us: 'We don't serve fine wine in half-pints, buddy / Is the sound of God.'

Outside The Bar, beyond the unnamed Midwest town in which it sits, 'R' is better known as the composer Robert Ashley. Ashley – now aged 81, and one of the most important living exponents of opera in America, or, more precisely, the most important living exponent of American opera – created Raoul, Buddy, Rodney and The Bar for Perfect Lives, an opera originally conceived and developed for TV between 1978–83. Produced by Ashley, Carlota Schoolman and The Kitchen in New York, Perfect Lives evolved through a number of live iterations before being broadcast in the UK by Channel Four in 1983, back in the day when the broadcaster's schedules supported radical art and minority-interest audiences.

Perfect Lives is an opera about ... Jeez, where shall I begin? Well, not at the beginning, because Perfect Lives is about digressions. As Ashley says, 'No story has a beginning, it's all digression [...] It's digression what everybody does, every time. The trick of performing that piece is that we literally never know what we're going to do until we hear the first note.'² Like talking, it's about being in the moment; we don't know what we're going to say until we say it. 'Composing music', Ashley holds, 'is the process of constantly making a decision about when you're going to update what you've just done.'³ Perfect Lives consists of digressions about the US landscape and American lives, performed in American vernacular language. 'I'm trying hard, in Perfect Lives, to reproduce the music of the way people talk. It's not poetry, it's song. It's song in the same way that, I suppose, The Iliad was a song. It's just a song. If you read any one line, it's not that interesting in itself, but if you read a hundred they start to make sense.'⁴ John Cage once said of it: 'What about the Bible? And the Koran? It doesn't matter. We have Perfect Lives.'

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Digressing. 'If I were from the big town, I would be calm and debonair. The big town doesn't send its riff-raff out.' The drink must be going to my head, buddy. To get back to the point, it's been said that Ashley is a great American writer disguised as a composer. ('A little knowledge dot dot dot.') You could also say that *Perfect Lives* – with its future-retro animated title sequences, complex fusions of internal and external locations, wild video effects and outlandish costuming – is a great work of experimental television drama disguised as performance art disguised as video art disguised as an opera. It was originally conceived of as the second work in a trilogy, bookended by *Atalanta (Acts of God)* (1982–91) and *Now Eleanor's Idea* (1993), each work using progressively smaller and more fragmented units of narrative, and each concerning itself with different stages of the American story – from its links to the old world in *Atalanta (Acts of God)*, passing through the Midwest for *Perfect Lives* to life at its most western edge in *Now Eleanor's Idea*. The works use aspects of language that have long interested Ashley: dialect patterns, chanting, ultrafast speech, ecstatic religious preaching, Renaissance philosophy, involuntary speech (also explored in his 1979 work *Automatic Writing*), understanding the world verbally as opposed to physically, or even metaphysically (an idea he first touched upon in his 1967 opera *That Morning Thing*). Some parts of the trilogy share the same characters. Like a human heartbeat, they all have a pulse of 72 beats per minute.

A thumbnail sketch of the narrative that Ashley – or, if you prefer, 'R' – tells in *Perfect Lives* looks something like this. The story is divided into seven episodes, each set in a different location in a Midwest town: 'The Park (Privacy Rules)'; 'The Supermarket (Famous People)'; 'The Bank (Victimless Crime)'; 'The Bar (Differences)'; 'The Living Room (The Solutions)'; 'The Church (After the Fact)'; and 'The Backyard (T'Be Continued)'. Raoul and Buddy are itinerant musicians playing a residency at the *Perfect Lives Lounge*. They befriend Isolde and 'D' ('The Captain of the Football Team') and together hatch a plot 'to remove a sizeable amount of money from The Bank for one day (and one day only) and let the whole world know that it was missing'. If they get caught, it's a crime, but it's Art with a capital 'A' if they get away with it. 'D' works at The Bank, where one of the clerks, Gwyn, is planning to elope with his friend Ed. A plan is made to use the lovers' car to take the money across the border to Indiana and then return it the next day. That, at the very least, is the kernel of the dizzying story. As the opera unfolds, we also meet characters such as Rodney The Bartender, Lucille, Snowdrift, Will and Ida – The Sheriff and his wife, also 'D' and Isolde's parents – Helen and John (innocent bystanders from a local old people's home), Dwayne (who has problems making his speech understood), and the bank clerks Jennifer, Kate, Linda, Susie and Eleanor (who falls in love with Buddy, and whose later religious experiences are explored in *Now Eleanor's Idea*).

As living and breathing musicology in practice, *Perfect Lives* explores how storytelling creates music and – tangentially – how American social models grew in tandem with musical forms from Europe and Africa. Built into the very structures of how it was written and is performed – there is no definitive score, only the libretto, some diacritic and harmonic indications, and a set of intricate time signatures to follow – *Perfect Lives* is about the sociability of music. Ashley realized *Perfect Lives* over a period of years with a number of close collaborators. ('I only work with geniuses,' he says. 'In the end it pays off.'5) In a documentary made by Peter Greenaway in 1983, as part of his 'Four American Composers' series, Ashley said he wanted to 'allow the performers to make musical statements as unpremeditated as speech itself'. Rehearsal allows performance to become habitual, in the way that speech is habitual, but *Perfect Lives's* realization is largely in the moment. It's about the musical commons that being in a band grants access to. Buddy's virtuosic piano playing – which, over the course of the opera, wraps cocktail jazz inside pop inside boogie-woogie inside classical – was by 'Blue' Gene Tyranny, who developed the harmonic structures used in the opera. Composer Peter Gordon was the music's producer and in charge of electronics and mixing, while musicians Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem evolved the singing parts for the various characters that make up the chorus – Isolde, 'D', Gwyn, Ed and so on. Musically, the result is unique, of no school of postwar US music other than its own: steady, loping drum patterns, washes of synthesized strings, Buddy's almost stream-of-consciousness piano – all somehow harmonically smooth and easy on the ear yet packed with complexity and detail. And throughout it all, there is Ashley's voice: a sing-song patter with the soft-spoken intimacy of a late-night radio DJ.

Perfect Lives found its visual form through John Sanborn, who directed the opera for television. Dean Winkler was responsible for staging, video editing, animations and graphics, while Jacqueline Humbert designed the opera's audacious lounge lizard and '80s high-fashion-meets-sci-fi costuming and make-up. Templates for the camera movements in the opera were mapped out by Sanborn, who divided the screen into a series of vertical and horizontal bands: 'The Park' is represented by the low, tracking shot of a horizon, for instance, and 'The Supermarket' uses the baseline of 'The Park's horizon from which it shoots two converging lines to form a triangular pattern – like an aggressive zoom shot. 'The Bank' is a grid and 'The Bar' just the vertical lines from the grid. These are subtly echoed by 'R's hand-gestures – sometimes side-to-side, other times up-and-down – or Buddy's hands dancing across the keyboard. *Perfect Lives* is opera for the screen age, not the crumbling theatres of 19th-century operatic form.

Identities in *Perfect Lives* are fluid representations. Robert is Raoul, Rodney and The Justice of the Peace. Jill plays Isolde and Ida and Gwyn. ('When I work in someone else's work it's more helpful to me to know what they want me to do, and I think I realized what he [Ashley] wanted me to do was to find out what I'm supposed to do myself,' says Van Tieghem – or 'D', Will, Ed – in Greenaway's film.) That's an easy enough idea to understand, but then you get carried away listening to Buddy, take

your eyes off 'R' to look down at your drink – sans ice – glance up again and 'R' is no longer Robert. Ned Sublette is now 'R' and 'R' is Cuban – grew up north of the US/Mexico border. Elio Villafranca has swapped places with 'Blue' Gene to become Buddy; also Cuban but grew up south of the border. The Bar has been rechristened La Vidas Perfectas Lounge.

'Whoa, Lucille!' How'd that happen? Well, the end of 2011 saw a number of revivals of Ashley's work. That Morning Thing was restaged at The Kitchen in a production directed by Fast Forward, curated as part of Performa 11 by Mark Beasley. Varispeed produced Perfect Lives Manhattan and Perfect Lives Brooklyn; new arrangements of the piece performed in site-specific locations around New York City. Vidas Perfectas – with 'R' and Buddy now in residency in La Vidas Perfectas Lounge – is an ambitious new Spanish-language version of Perfect Lives, directed by Alex Waterman (who, with Will Holder, is currently working on a study of Ashley's practice, due to be published at the end of this year) from a translation by Javier Sainz de Robles. Produced under the auspices of ISSUE Project Room and Ballroom Marfa, Vidas Perfectas is, like the original Perfect Lives, designed for television, and will grow steadily in phases over the course of the next two years. Three episodes were staged in December 2011 at the Irondale Theater in Brooklyn – 'El Parque' (The Park), 'La Iglesia' (The Church) and 'El Patio de Atrás' (The Backyard) – with further episodes to be produced in Marfa, Texas, this summer, and a pilot version planned for the end of the year. It is a slow, carefully evolving project, because: 'we don't serve fine wine in half-pints, buddy.'



Vidas Perfectas relocates the action to west Texas, on the US/Mexico border. For Ashley, opera is characters in a landscape telling stories musically, and he's been telling stories in Spanish since 1979. Spanish is the second language of the US, first arriving in the 16th century, and today spoken by some 35 million people. Jean-Luc Godard observed in *Notre Musique* (Our Music, 2004) that America is a country that has no name – there's a US, which is in the Americas, but there are many other Americas too, and the US story has been one of looking for self-hood, along the way erasing other cultures that share the same territory. Vidas Perfectas is about the literal and psychological borders between the different Americas, so stories about the US are probably just as well told in Spanish as they are in English.

If, musically speaking – and Ashley's work is nothing if not about musically speaking – Perfect Lives refracts US lives through jazz, boogie-woogie and pop, then Vidas Perfectas looks at the Cuban and Cajun strains that run through the culture: rock'n'roll, Caribbean music, mambo, salsa. Villafranca, the award-winning Cuban jazz pianist, takes on the role of Buddy, resplendent in a spangled customized mariachi jacket. Sublette – a Spanish-speaking gringo from west Texas whose musical experiences span '80s downtown avant-garde rock, Afro-Caribbean music, and country and western, and who is a noted scholar of Cuban music and the musical cultures of New Orleans – cuts an imposing figure as 'R'; Ashley's silk scarves and shiny suits replaced with a black stetson, laredo tie and cowboy boots. Abraham Gomez-Delgado (a composer of Peruvian and Puerto Rican descent) and Elisa Santiago (a dancer, designer and performer whose Spanish is classical Castellano) play the chorus roles. Waterman has built Vidas Perfectas along the same lines as Ashley's productions of Perfect Lives: with Gordon back on board as producer, and artist Sarah Crowner designing the sets, Vidas Perfectas 'uses the social relations that were involved in making the music as the model for its remaking'⁶, embracing conversation, improvisation and process to tint and colour the production in new ways. 'Experimental music', Waterman suggests, 'is about doing what you don't know how to do.'⁷ Vidas Perfectas is not a slavish replication of Perfect Lives. The sets and costuming evoke the south; Sublette's black-clad southern gent look, for instance, or the elegant way in which Crowner's sets seem to evoke both early Modernist abstraction and Mexican traditional design. Waterman and his collaborators delicately transform Ashley's music; it remains unmistakably Ashley, but Latin influences are teased out and foregrounded, by both Villafranca's piano and by new shifts of rhythmic emphasis in the pre-recorded drum patterns. The performances in Spanish put Ashley's libretto into motion in new ways: Sublette's rich voice plays down the beguiling casualness of Ashley's intimate patter, infusing the role of 'R' with a more brooding intensity. Even if you do not speak Spanish, surrendering yourself to the musicality of the overall sound still, somehow, allows access to the mystery of Perfect Lives's libretto.

John Cage once said: 'Qué pasa con la Biblia? Y el Corán? No importa. Tenemos Vidas Perfectas.' In the world of Perfect Lives – Manhattan, the Midwest or Texas – people 'come to talk. They pass the time. They soothe their thoughts with lemonade. They say things like: She never had a stitch that she could call her own, poor thing. And, Carl's still president over at the bank, ain't he? [...] They are the planets in this scheme of things.'

1 All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the libretto to Perfect Lives, published in Robert Ashley, Perfect Lives, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign/Dublin/London, 2011

2 'Robert Ashley Talks about Perfect Lives', *Ibid.*, p.173

3 *Ibid.*, p.149

4 *Ibid.*, p.168

5 Promotional video for Vidas Perfectas, <http://tinyurl.com/8x2py5b>

6 Alex Waterman, 'Robert Ashley', *Bomb*, issue 118, Winter 2012

7 Alex Waterman in conversation with the author, New York, January 2012

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ARTFORUM

Critics' Picks

April 13, 2012



Sarah Crowner

GALERIE NORDENHAKE | STOCKHOLM

Hudiksvallsgatan 8

March 29–May 6

Sarah Crowner's latest exhibition features paintings, sculptures, and an outstanding stage curtain based on a 1956 theater backdrop by the Polish artist Maria Jarema. As in her previous output, Crowner sews pieces of painted and untreated linen together to produce taut, geometrical patchwork canvases or drapey backdrops, which are often based on specific historical compositions.

While it is clear that Crowner deeply admires twentieth-century avant-garde artists such as Victor Vasarely and Lygia Clark—she has often adopted their vibrant colors, forms, and shapes—her new works depart from her earlier attempts to carry on a Constructivist tradition. Here Crowner seems to be learning by doing, experimenting with her own compositions rather than predicating her canvases on past exemplars (with the exception of the Jarema curtain). Indeed, Crowner's predominant influences are avant-gardist instances where theater, music, dance, and art coalesce, as in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's sculptural puppets or Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus theater workshop. Each painting is therefore a composition of her own, while also doubling a proposition for a backdrop to be used in a performance setting. Indeed, Crowner's predilection for color and form make her stretched canvases well suited as proscenium paintings, and nothing would prevent them from being engaged in such extramural settings beyond the white cube. The implication that they could be viewed in different contexts is more than welcome.

— *Theodor Ringborg*

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MODERNPAINTERS

NEW YORK

Sarah Crowner

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery // September 7 - October 23



CROWNER'S SOLO SHOW "ACROBAT" takes the renowned modern dancer and choreographer Erick Hawkins as a point of inspiration and departure. A photograph of the young Hawkins executing a leaping spread eagle is at the center of a 2011 gouache collage that gives the exhibition its title, which is spelled out, together with Crowner's name, in the style of a concert poster. The artist uses this photo—taken during a performance of Martha Graham's acclaimed 1947 *Stephen Acrobat*—as a springboard for works that induce thoughts of the balletic, the theatrical, and the performative.

In addition to the collage, the exhibition contains three works—two untitled sets of paintings and a sculpture, all from 2011—each dealing with a separate facet of theatrical performance. The most complex and fluid piece, suggestive of a dance movement, is a group of six pictures lined up on one wall in a neat row and displaying Crowner's signature style of sewing together cuts of variously treated linen and cotton canvas. Her surfaces are busier than those of Blinky Palermo's fabric paintings but less textural than the textile works of Sergej Jensen. Using both gouache and oil paint, she creates an elegant array of formal relationships within a geometry of lines, shapes, and colors that unifies the sextet. Less ambitious and restricted to a gray scale is a diptych conjuring a vacant stage with curtains drawn and spotlights ablaze, as if an entertainment is about to begin.

The sculpture, *Stage Right, Stage Left*, is composed of eight vertical painted- and stained-wooden elements arranged at different depths on a large square plinth. In color and form they echo the shapes in the six paintings hanging on the opposite wall. If this is a stage, then these pieces might be props, perhaps dancers. They are unassuming and charming, dwarfed by and yet commanding the platform on which they stand.

One question is whether "Acrobat" portrays elements of theater or is itself theatrical, and here the show's utterly conventional relationship to its audience is a limiting factor. Crowner seems one step away from fully activating that connection with the spectator, but to do so would require her to test out a new form: installation or even performance.

Charlie Schultz

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Art in America

December 12, 2011

Robert Ashley Gets a New Backdrop

by Catherine Kron

If there's such a thing as an "artist's composer," Robert Ashley is it. The 81-year-old opera composer and performer, who has earned a cult-like following, is credited with revitalizing the opera form for fine art crowds. He is admired for his scores, whose unorthodox formats appeal to musicians, performers and visual artists. But his underground credibility might be blown with *Vidas Perfectas*, a reimagining of his 1983 opera *Perfect Lives*. The new work opens next week at the Irondale Theater in Brooklyn.



Perfect Lives, a loose story of a bank heist, is best remembered as a highly distorted experimental video. The new live show, produced by the musician/scholar Alex Waterman, involves collaborations between Waterman and commissioned artists. Ashley was not involved, and Waterman made dramatic changes to the original: translating the work, which is sung by four vocalists, from its original English to Spanish; and splitting the original videos into new projects. This is the first installment of the series, and addresses only the first three sections of the original video. Each project will take place in a new location, and employ a different set of contributors.

For this adaptation of the video's first three sections, artist Sarah Crowner created a backdrop and sets. Crowner, who is known for her use of sewn fabrics stretched over canvas to color-blocking effect, had been developing a series of curtains she thought of as backdrops for a play. "Suddenly Alex and I noticed that the white parts on the backdrop could function as screens," Crowner told A.i.A. "We started discussing the idea of projecting something on the screen."

The two decided to project the original score from *Perfect Lives* as a direct visual reference for *Vidas Perfectas*. It serves to bring Ashley's scores, normally seen only by the work's performers, to the audience.

In collaboration with Eve Essex, New York artist Anna Craycroft has made text projections derived from the work's original English—Ashley's narrative score is dictated as a list of lyrics with indications for the work's rhythm and key but no staff or clef—and will project her version as a visual reference for the audience, akin to subtitles for the Spanish vocals. These visuals are projected onto the actors and set, both aiding and disrupting the audiovisual experience of the work.

Craycroft says the change from English to Spanish is appropriate for Ashley's operas. "You would think, if you're performing a narrative poem, why eliminate the possibility for maybe half the audience to understand it?" she says. "But in *Perfect Lives*, a lot of the narrative was obscured by how the words are articulated against the piano and drum track. The language becomes phonetically embedded in the overall experience of the music."

The show will next move to Marfa, TX, this spring, where Waterman will invite new artists to interpret another section of the work.

Vidas Perfectas, presented by Issue Project Room, Marfa Ballroom and the Irondale Theater, opens this Thursday at the Irondale in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. The show will run Dec. 15–17.

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NEWYORKOBSERVER /Art & Culture

REVIEW

Raoul De Keyser at David Zwirner Gallery and Sarah Crouner at Nicelle Beauchene

Will Heinrich

Framed by the conventional whiteness of an unframed white canvas on a white wall is an open black rectangle. (The white is conventional in the sense that the axioms of Euclidean geometry are conventional.) Inside that rectangle, which is inside Raoul De Keyser's painting *The Chir*, is the formal space where the rest of "Freedom," his current show at David Zwirner Gallery, takes place.

Another open rectangle, this one tall and thin like a dressing mirror, stands on a white floor defined by another black line, leaning against what looks like a wall, except that in the upper part of the painting what ought to be that wall's corner seems to have fallen down. This small conflict neither creates the optical dissonance you'd expect if it were more blatant nor shatters the Euclidean room completely, though a shallower space of overlapping shapes or interlocking lines is also possible. It doesn't break anything—it merely bends. Instead of pushing his Platonic shapes and well-polished painterly techniques in new directions, Mr. De Keyser gently pulls at them, creating space, like the God of the Kaballah, through recession.

This vacant new space isn't large: it has room for only a formal allusion to natural colors—grass green, sky blue, solar reds and yellows—and a few spectral lines and angles, which combine in delicate movements that are difficult to see. In *No Title (8 Verticals/5)*, where vertical lines of yellow cross horizontal streaks of black, one thicker black line could be the horizon, but the rest remains unformed and void. In *No Title (8 Verticals/6)*, seven sketchy red lines could be bloody fingermarks descending the canvas, or fiery spirits rising up, but they aren't yet either: they're in an amorphous state that precedes decision.

The most defined shape is a circle. In *No Title (8 Verticals/7)*, an open circle of blue-on-red—a rigorously constructed ultramarine—inhabits a pale, blushing void, while in *No Title (8 Verticals/8)*, a red disc is protected by a white buffer and incomplete black border from a darker, area of pink. In *Falling Balls*, white-on-white circles float in a different, red-bordered room; in *The Failed Juggle*, they burn red like a rash; and in two cases they even join with thick black lines to make vermicular, Munchlike figures. But the appeal of the circle—in addition to the reference to Zen painting—is that it's the least definite of definite shapes, the best way to render substance without form.

In *Double Crossing (8 Verticals/4)*, an arrow the color of dried blood, made of two lines that don't quite meet in a point, crosses to the right, while another arrow, this one a mere shadowy darkness in the white void, crosses to the left beneath it, making a pair of guillemets collapsed together: the only thing being said is that something is being said.

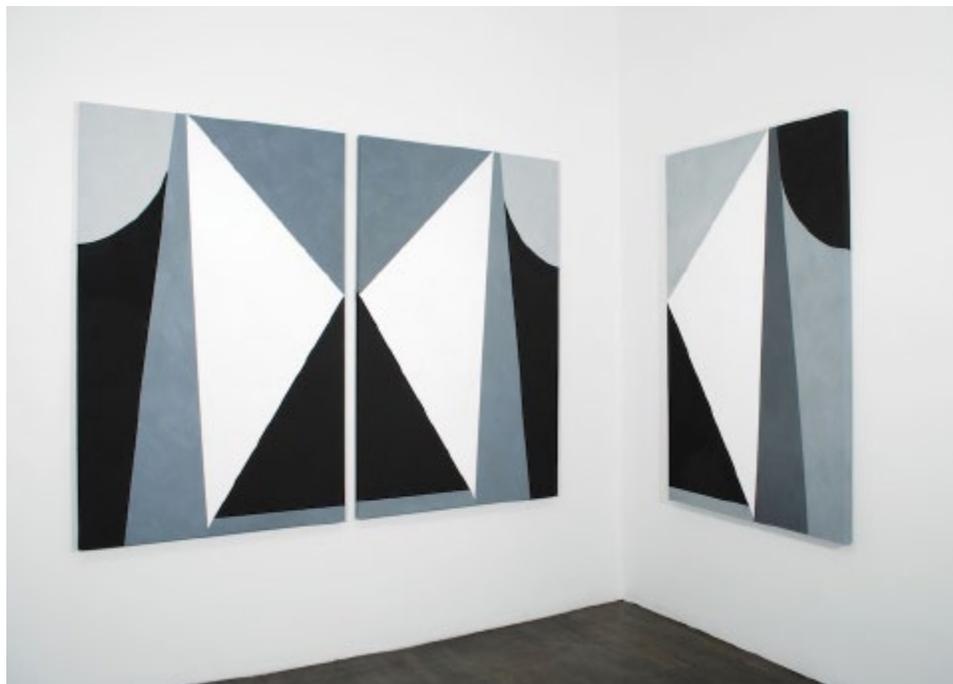
The opposite of Mr. De Keyser's ambiguous, gestural minimalism—bearing in mind that opposites, in dreams, are often unities—might be the younger artist Sarah Crouner's "Acrobats" at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Ms. Crouner sews together canvas and linen—painted, raw, and dyed—in sharp, paper-cutout shapes and bright colors to make theatrically cheerful abstractions of deceptive transparency.

A set of Matisse-like painted wooden maquettes, caught halfway between sculpture and set design, set the stage for three untitled pieces of increasing size and complexity: a single sewn-up canvas painted in gouache; a related diptych; and a set of six canvases hung in one kinetic line.

The horizontally symmetrical diptych combines black, white and gray triangles into a pattern that looks like a stylized perspective exercise, or a close-up on a man's stiff collar—and with six large triangles all pointing to the inch of blank wall between them, they're very hard to look into. It's hard not to imagine them further apart and framing something else. The accompanying single piece, which duplicates the right panel (with a slight variation of color), makes it easier to see the sophistication of design. But even there, your eyes begin moving around before you have a chance to think. If Mr. De Keyser subverts the viewer's vision, Ms. Crowner co-opts it: she moves you along with a deftly artficed ease that makes trying to stop feel as futile as looking for typos in David Copperfield.

The six canvases, also untitled, are of varying widths but all the same height, and constitute a single piece. Beginning with sky blue and a white swoop curving rapidly up into a yellow bar, the piece moves through broad curves and shallow angles, black blocks, gray skies, white arrows and white swoops again, with what can only be called poetic or musical devices—the structured repetition of themes and motifs—to a red-and-green coda that bounces you back to the beginning again.

The work's generically modern looks borrow—as Andrew Russeth recently wrote about in these pages—from earlier 20th-century artists by way of the theater, but their looks, considered statically, aren't the point. Their looks are only a means, because what they also borrow from the theater—and what is far more subversive than any amount of physical deconstruction of the painting—is the pragmatism of entertainment. This dynamic, six-part series knows what it means, but it doesn't care, so long as the viewers continue watching.



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NEW YORK OBSERVER

Great Leaps: Sarah Crowner at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York

Andrew Russeth
September 23, 2011

Paintings have behaved oddly this year.

At MoMA, Jutta Koether's became props for interactive events and then morphed into sculptures; at Friedrich Petzel, pieces made jointly by Stephen Prina and Wade Guyton disappeared after only one day; and at Carriage Trade, a series of monochromes were attributed to a nonexistent artist, their origin never quite explained. And then there is the case of Sarah Crowner's beautiful and peculiar new show at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, on the Lower East Side.



"I like the idea that a painting can have other functions, depending on how the viewer interacts with it," Sarah Crowner told The Observer, as she stood in her studio in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn. "A painting," she said, "could be an environment for a performance." She spoke quickly and seriously, as if she had thought this out and was enthusiastic about the possibilities of her choices.

It was the end of August, and the surrounding walls were lined with her abstract paintings, which were soon to be shipped off to her two September shows, at Nicelle Beauchene and Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels. They radiated movement, arcs and angles brushing up against one another, and were colored with luscious pinks, blues and oranges, pitched to the eye-melting spectrum of Blinky Palermo's late works.

"I had been thinking of the forms in my paintings not only abstractly," Ms. Crowner, 37, said, pointing to two diptychs in a corner, "but also referring to a platform, opening curtains, spotlights." In each work, the left and right paintings were perfectly symmetrical, and with her cue, it was suddenly possible to read their squares, triangles and curves as the stage of a theater, a field readied for action. Her Brussels show actually includes a low wooden platform, turning viewers into performers.

At the same time, Ms. Crowner's paintings themselves seem to perform. Six works, each a little more than three feet tall, hung in a line, near where we stood. "As you can see," Ms. Crowner said, motioning along the row, from left to right, "this yellow bar bounces from one work into a triangle on another, and there's a similar red part that continues here and here and then there." She motioned from one painting to another to another, following the action.

"I think what's more interesting is that a painting has to relate to what's next to it, whether it's another painting or a blank wall," she said. "I'm thinking about paintings as part of relationships rather than singular entities on their own."

In her show at Nicelle Beauchene, fittingly titled “Acrobat,” those six paintings are now arrayed across one wall, but they soon may split apart, as individual paintings are sold off into separate collections, their individual arcs and planes pointing out to those other, scattered works. During The Observer’s visit, Ms. Crowner carefully lifted one off the wall and showed us its back. It was neatly lined with stitches, which held taut the various colored planes of her work. In a single painting there were swaths of raw canvas, linen, dyed linen and painted canvas.

“Sewing made sense at first because it was a way of cutting up, collaging, reorganizing and re-constructing in a practical way,” she said. Her works are paintings, but they are also collages, fabric works and constructions— they shrug off categories, and do so well looking almost entirely effortless.

“I hadn’t really shown them in public until that show at Nicelle Beauchene,” Ms. Crowner told us of those works, referring to her first New York exhibition, in March, 2009. Ms. Beauchene had met her for the first just time a year earlier, as she was preparing to open her gallery and was making studio visits. A friend from Paul Kasmin Gallery had suggested she visit Ms. Crowner.

“She was not just appropriating, but understanding modernism as a tool to render her work,” Ms. Beauchene told The Observer, when asked about her reaction to her first visit. Ms. Crowner was taking precedents like the sewn works of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Palermo and embarking with them to elegant new ends. “Modernism was cold and hard-edged, and she was adding hand back into this, which I really appreciated,” the gallerist said. She decided to show Ms. Crowner. By the time of the exhibition, the recession was fully in place. “The market was slow, but we sold out the first show,” Ms. Beauchene said. Curators also took notice, and by the end of the year Ms. Crowner had been included in the *White Columns Annual*, curated by Miriam Katzeff and James Hoff, of the art book imprint Primary Information (which will soon produce a book with the artist), and had been tapped for the 2010 Whitney Biennial.

When we marveled to Ms. Crowner about her meteoric rise, she laughed. She has, of course, been in the art world for some time, earning her MFA from Manhattan’s Hunter College in 2002, and working as a studio assistant for artists like Rudolf Stingel, Claes Oldenburg and the art publishers Dexter Sinister, while making and showing her work.

That first show at Beauchene also included a number of rough-hewn, unglazed ceramic sculptures of pots, pitchers and cases, without bottoms, and in The New York Times, art critic Karen Rosenberg cast her as “one of many young artists to reinvigorate the medium,” comparing her pieces to those of the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi and the storied Surrealist sculptor Beatrice Wood.

“She almost uses history as a medium for her work,” Ms. Beauchene said. Indeed, Ms. Crowner created many of her previous fabric paintings based in elements of works by Brazilian Constructivist Lygia Clark and, in the case of her Whitney Biennial pieces, the Op artist Bridget Riley. In these new works, Ms. Crowner has not used any direct source material, but she has continued to eye early-20th-century modernism for inspiration.

“There was this moment when Matisse was painting sets, Sophie Taeuber-Arp was making sculptural puppets and set decorations and Fernand Leger was working with the Ballets Russes,” Ms. Crowner said. “Painters jumping into architecture, sound poetry, puppet theater; everyone mixing it up in the theater or in a gallery or on the street.” She added, “Perhaps there was, but there didn’t seem to be a sense of division or hierarchy. There was a certain freedom at this time that was inspiring.”

There are sculptures in the artist’s latest show at Beauchene, but they are wooden, instead of ceramics. Set on a platform in the gallery, they mirror many of the shapes in the paintings that hang on the wall across the space. “They’re maquettes for stage props in the same sense that the paintings are proposals for backdrops,” she said. They could, in other words, be blown up to a gigantic scale, presented in theaters behind dances or operas, channeling those early days of modern art in oblique, unexpected and refreshing ways.

We proposed that possibility to Ms. Crowner, and she smiled. “That would be a perfect—I won’t say ending—but a great extension to the project,” she said.

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ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

Sarah Crowner

09.05.11

Sarah Crowner is a Brooklyn-based artist whose vibrant sewn paintings have been based on specific compositions from the past, such as early works by Victor Vasarely and Lygia Clark. In two concurrent shows this fall, Crowner presents new work that amplifies her previous methods while setting them on a new course. "Acrobat" opens at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York on September 7 and "Ballet Plastique" opens at Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels on September 11.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, I painted with a certain impatience about painting. Its flatness, its weight and slowness, irritated me somehow. So I turned my back on it for a time and started to explore ceramic sculpture. As it happened, there was something about using my hands and manipulating clay that led me back to painting, but in a different way. I realized that I wasn't interested in the conventional fixity of these media; I didn't want to wait for a line of paint or some clay to dry. I wanted more immediacy and spontaneity, and I realized that I could just treat a painting like a collage: Cut up forms, arrange them on the ground, rearrange them, and sew them up again. The physicality of this approach, using paint, canvas, and a stretcher, as if to make an object rather than a picture, made sense to me.

I've been occupied with making sewn and shaped geometric canvases since then. Each new work contributes to this project. An encounter with one piece—a symmetrical diptych with bright, sharp, red triangles on either side—led to the new bodies of work I'm showing this fall. Between the red triangles there is an exposed center of raw linen, an unfolding square of white paint, and, below this, black rectangles. It struck me as theatrical curtains opening onto an empty stage—a proscenium painting. The image of the stage was the result of the collaging process, and my interest—in this case—to play with symmetry. I spent time looking at the work alone, and with people standing in front of it, yet still couldn't shake the idea that it was a backdrop with an open curtain.

I'm curious about the impact of time on our experience of painting: What does time do to an abstract collection of static forms? If you walk into a gallery or museum you might experience a painting for as little as one minute—but what if that same painting is hanging in your living (or work) space for thirty-five years? Or what if you were seated in an auditorium "watching" that painting—perhaps with dancers moving in front of it—for, say, forty-five minutes? What is that experience? How can its quality and contours change inside the frame of a minute, forty-five minutes, or thirty-five years? These hypothetical propositions are compelling to me as I manipulate the materials that come together in my work. I hope that somehow they translate, such that the exhibitions could be read as proposals to choreographers and theater directors.

The paintings thus materialize as backdrops, or proposals for backdrops, for an undefined performance or theatrical event. In Brussels, I'm showing a series of paintings on three walls. Hung tightly together, they will appear as one continual painting with various compositions and forms colliding. I'm building a stage in the gallery, a simple low plywood platform. To encounter the paintings, viewers will have to step up onto the stage and assume the position of performers.

In New York, a similarly tight row of canvases will cover the walls like a frieze. To accompany the paintings, I'm working on a group of small wooden sculptures, about thirty inches tall, with flat geometric-shaped fronts and curved and linear backings. I see these as tabletop maquettes for stage props. Together, they recast my questions around painting; they offer the idea that a painting or a sculpture might function as a proposal for something else. If a painting can suddenly read as a huge backdrop, could a small sculpture be a model for something larger than life? Rather than qualifying the status of painting or sculpture, it retools these forms, giving them a new feeling and a new function in space, one that invites movement, interaction even.



A view of Sarah Crowner's studio and her new work.

I'm always using art history as a medium, cutting it up and trying to reengage it. In these new bodies of work I'm thinking about moments in the early twentieth century when the avant-gardes were collaborating freely and cross-pollinating from music to theater to painting to poetry (think of Hannah Höch's Dada dolls, Sophie Taeuber-Arp's sculptural puppets and set decorations, Maria Jarema's abstract theatrical backdrops, or Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus theater workshop). This is a departure from my previous work employing specific compositions, and this wider conceptual field has also added a new dimension, perhaps somehow historicizing the physicality and material immediacy that has entered my process. The mediation on "medium" has expanded the sense of that word, for me. If wood or clay or paint acts as one kind of medium, supporting and materializing thought at the level of intimate engagement, then the scale and dynamics of performance and the metaphysics of stagecraft might conduct another kind of channeling.

—As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

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Whitney Biennial 2010

Whitney Museum of American Art
February 25 - May 30, 2010

SARAH CROWNER



Superficie Modulada 1956 [Part 1],
2009/ Gouache on sewn canvas,
58 x 36 in. (147.3 x 91.4 cm) /
Private collection 2010

Sarah Crowner confronts the history of abstract painting and sculpture with the often-marginalized traditions of decorative and applied arts. Her sewn, painted canvases; rough-hewn ceramic vessels; and mosaic tiles not only question the privileged space of the fine arts, but also function as critical interventions within it.

In some of her recent work, Crowner assembles angular pieces of painted canvas and unpainted linen using a sewing machine. The geometric compositions and unmodulated passages of color evoke Hard-Edge paintings of the 1950's and 1960's, and in some cases Crowner appropriates specific compositions of that era as "templates." However, the visible seams that result from Crowner's process interrupt the slick surfaces of those works. "The 'hard edges' are now sewn," Crowner writes, "exposing the stitch of the thread." The act of sewing, with connotations of domestic labor, deflates high Modernism's rhetoric of transcendent opticality by evoking the tactility of a quilt.

By using new materials to reconstitute the artistic legacies she describes as the "ghosts of art history," Crowner foregrounds the aesthetic heterogeneity latent with in abstract paintings of the 1950's. Her canvases engage the psychologically complex practice of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, and the obliquely mystical "open form" works by the Swedish painter Olle Baertling, more than they do the macho aloofness of the American paintings that all too frequently serve as an emblem of that period.

Crowner's investigation into what she calls "the dialectic between Modernism and various practices of craft" extends to ceramics. Her unglazed vessels and mosaic tiles reference episodes in twentieth-century art when the experimental impulses of painting and sculpture could not be separated from concurrent developments in the decorative arts. Beatrice Wood, a key figure in the New York Dada scene and a pioneering ceramicist, looms large in Crowner's practice and was the inspiration for her series, *Handbuilt Vessels* (2008). Like Wood, Crowner balances a self-conscious negotiation of "fine" art with the rich tradition of the handmade.

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The New York Times

Art in Review
May 1, 2009

'Paintings and Pots'

Nicelle Beauchene

163 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side



"Paintings and Pots," Sarah Crowner's first New York solo show, pairs hard-edged geometric canvases and lumpen, unglazed ceramics. They go together better than you might expect, thanks to Ms. Crowner's interests in craft, design and decorative strains of modernism.

The two-dimensional works aren't painted, but stitched together from monochromatic pieces of canvas and linen. Most enlarge fragments of midcentury modern artworks by Lorser Feitelson, Lygia Clark and others. Three striking black, white and gray abstractions take their titles, "Superficie Modulada," from a painting series by Ms. Clark. A few of Ms. Crowner's canvases are original compositions, though it's impossible to tell without looking at the checklist.

The pots, grouped attractively on black metal pedestals and on the gallery's windowsill, are harder to place. Their irregular surfaces evoke Morandi's paintings of bottles and vases, but also the Dada pottery of Beatrice Wood and contemporary ceramics by Andrew Lord. Hollow but bottomless, they aren't really vessels. They function mainly as a foil to the paintings, which are full of sharp points and jagged edges.

Ms. Crowner, who worked with ceramic tiles in an earlier collaboration with Paulina Olowska, is one of many young artists to reinvigorate the medium. Her patchwork paintings are impressive, too, in that they deftly sidestep cliché about craft-centric art movements like Pattern and Decoration. But she stops short of creating the participatory environments favored by Ms. Clark, Andrea Zittel and other proponents of D.I.Y. modernism.

KAREN ROSENBERG

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BLOUIN ARTINFO



Sarah Crowner

by Lyra Kilston
04/06/09

Appropriation comes in many forms: homage, obscure archival excavation, irony, and good-old hero worship. Brooklyn-based artist Sarah Crowner tends toward homage, appropriating techniques or formal motifs as a way to get closer to artists she admires. Last year, she presented work responding to the ceramist Beatrice Wood. In Crowner's most recent solo, she has expanded her interest to abstract painting in a Constructivist vein. For a 2009 series titled "Superficie Modulada, 1956" (Superficial Modulation), Crowner directly appropriated sections of Lygia Clark's early paintings, producing four large canvases, their sharp angles of black, gray, and white intersecting to create clean geometries. Some smaller canvases add colors into the mix, notably summery yellows, salmons, and fuchsias. On closer inspection we realize that Crowner has created her taut compositions by sewing pieces of fabric together, so that the edges of two colors are actually perforated seams. This provides an engaging variety of textures — a bar of black might be made from black cloth, or black gouache, or both — and lends an organic quality to what would otherwise be slick Constructivist copies.

Shown alongside the canvases are three groupings of hand-built pottery on stands. All unglazed, save for one spray-painted silver stalagmite, Crowner's lumpy white vessels huddle together like Morandi compositions, and are peculiarly bottomless — lest you equate ceramics with domestic utility. What of this emphasis on the handmade, sewing, and clay sculpting? Strains of a feminist "art versus craft" debate arise, but too subtly to warrant any such reductive label. Instead, these two bodies of work point toward the value of dredging up and riffing on the endlessly fascinating story of 20th-century art — especially its lesser-known players — as a means for artists to discover their heroines, their selves.

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ARTFORUM

March 2009

Sarah Crowner and Paulina Olowska

DAADGALERIE, BERLIN

Paulina Olowska has made it her business to address hidden historical currents within modernism, pop culture, and arts and crafts—whether responding to Polish metalworking of the 1960s exhibiting an archive documenting the punk and New Wave scenes in Poland with almost no commentary, or devoting herself exclusively to the work of painter Zofia Stryjenska (1891-1974) in her contribution to the Fifth Berlin Biennial. For her show at the Berlin gallery of DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), as so often before, she incited a second artist to show with her, working with New York-based Sarah Crowner to revisit a marginal medium in the contemporary art world: ceramics.

The common denominator in the work of the two artists, exhibited jointly under the title “Ceramics and Other Things,” seems to be the use of flat, two-dimensional tiles. Where Olowska generally uses found tiles, which she then paints or spray-paints with abstract and figurative designs, Crowner fires her pieces herself, using white or brown clay, and leaves them completely unadorned. And whereas Olowska, embracing the ugliness of industry-standard bathroom tiles, concentrates on individual surface and painterly design, Crowner makes us of a significantly more graphic, geometric approach by assembling the tiles into a wide range of shapes—semicircles, rings, triangles, irregular trapezoids, and the like.

Both artists’ works were presented on six low platforms in the middle of the gallery, illuminated for either end by two freestanding industrial spotlights mounted on tripods, which evoked a craft show or fashion runway. The artists further emphasized the space’s showroom character by opening an ordinarily curtained section of its window façade, revealing the exhibition space to the street. In contrast to this “boutique presentation,” underlining the craftsmanship of these objects, the press release offered a second reading of the show: as an archeological site where artifacts from an obscure past were put on display, the fragments meticulously arranged to form coherent ensembles.

The exhibition as a whole seemed to be based on dialectic of “flat” and “deep”: two-dimensional tiles presented as objects extended into space; superficial craftsmanship and high art; the exteriority of commercial display and the historical depths unearthed by archeology. Olowska has tried again and again to produce conceptual meaning by bringing in a historical reference, reactivating a utopian potential buried in the depths of the past, or reclaiming elements formerly excluded from a hegemonic, Western, male-dominated discourse; now she has departed from this path. Even though she has often turned to handicraft, folk art, or DIY approaches in her past work, with this exhibition the contrast these categories offer to traditional artistic discourse came into sharper focus. And the principle of collaboration here had less to do with the questioning of a productive artistic ego—as one might assume—than with the parallelism between two distinct approaches to the same theme. The strange “flatness” of this show seemed above all to be communicating that the production of meaning is perhaps less a question of delving deep into historical strata than of doing it yourself.

— Dominikus Muller