

SARAH CAIN

2008 California Biennial

2008

Page 1

Orange County Museum of Art: October 26, 2008–March 15, 2009
Five Thirty Three, Los Angeles: February 13–March 15, 2009

Sarah Cain

Sarah Cain Born 1979, Albany, New York; lives and works in Los Angeles. Cain is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute (BFA, 2001) and the University of California, Berkeley (MFA, 2006). Her recent solo exhibitions include those at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco; Queen's Nails Annex, San Francisco; and the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery. She has also participated in group exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the 2006 Busan Biennale, Busan, Korea; the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, Colorado; Open Space, Vancouver; the Berkeley Art Center; the Sickle, Providence, Rhode Island; the Lab, San Francisco; the Luggage Store, San Francisco; and Kunst PLUS, Düsseldorf, Germany.

In conversation with Jens Hoffmann

Jens Hoffmann: What works are you going to show in the California Biennial?

Sarah Cain: I'm making two works on site, one at OCMA and one at Five Thirty Three, a warehouse downtown. The spaces are complete opposites. In my process I do a lot of thinking and planning beforehand, though a very large part of the work can't be planned. The way I work is an intuitive and spontaneous collaboration with the space and the moment in which the work is being made.

JH: How do you approach a place? What are the elements that you look for or that are necessary to form that intuitive collaboration with a space?

SC: I start by approaching the space through my body. I look for elements that already exist and then work with and against the flow of the architecture. The color emerges from my experience in the space—I can see it when I'm there. Sometimes I also bring in objects as other source materials to respond to.

JH: I am interested in hearing you speak a little bit more about the process of working site-specifically as a painter. Can you give me a concrete example of a work that you recently made and describe the process?

SC: I did a show in 2005 at Open Space in Victoria, British Columbia, an artist-run space, which offers more freedom while making the work. For this installation I visited the space beforehand, which was crucial. The flight and ferry ride there influenced that show and another that I was doing at the same time, at Queen's Nails Annex in San Francisco. When I arrived at Open Space and we toured the site, I noticed two windows and a hole in the ceiling that had been covered up. I wanted to open them back up. I heard a story about how the alley behind the covered windows was called the Negative Vortex. The homeless people sleeping there said it was haunted because radical offenders had walked down the alley prior to their execution.

It's rare that I incorporate stories into my work, but at the time I had come from doing another work on site in a squat in San Francisco that was also said to be haunted, so it felt right. When I returned to the space a few months later, I made two pieces. The first was called *Redirecting the Negative Vortex*. I began the piece by exposing the windows to invite in the idea of the ghosts, then I added ribbon and paint to act as a pathway moving from the windows to the floor, and leading to an antique mirror that I found in a local thrift store. The mirror was meant to reflect the ghosts out of the gallery, through the hole in the ceiling. That hole connected both pieces, as it was also above the natural viewing spot for the second piece I made, *Black Rose*. *Black Rose* was made from fourteen scarves that I found during the install, with black latex painted over the scarves and wall. The viewer would step back to see *Black Rose* and would look up to see a square of sky. The title of that piece was a tribute to the women of Gee's Bend, who quilt in a group under the name White Rose. I had no idea that I was going to make *Black Rose* until the week of install arrived.

JH: In a previous conversation you told me that you think a lot about the "West." What do you mean by that?

SC: California has a history of people migrating to it who are attempting to make their own realities. I think about the freedom, possibilities, failures, theft, desperation, and revolutions embedded in the land. It also is a place that people have historically sought out for solitude and meditation, which is a similar state to being a painter. The atmosphere of California has been one of the sources absorbed into my work recently.

JH: How is this atmosphere that you describe absorbed, and how does that manifest itself in your work?

SC: It's absorbed by being open and sensitive enough to deal with the psychic and emotional realms of space that might get overlooked for solely the physical. In my process I collect an alphabet of feelings, thoughts, visuals, and words. The work manifests as a nonnarrative translation of the world around me personally, as well as something larger than myself.

JH: What you describe is a very intuitive and personal process. How do you suggest a viewer should approach your work?

SC: With openness to the work and themselves. I'm interested in the unknown. I'm aware that for some audiences right now painting and abstraction are not popular.

JH: I'd like to know more about this idea that painting, and especially abstract painting, is not popular. What do you base this assessment on?

SC: This is based on personal experience. There is a hierarchy in the history of art that favors painting. A lot of the conflict around painting probably has always been a reaction against that. I know I react against it by frequently foregrounding the ephemeral. As far as abstraction goes, I think its greatest hindrance is the difficulty of putting words around it. Abstraction is its own language; it relies on a level of trust and, again, openness. The viewer needs to be vulnerable to view this type of art; it tends to speak to your gut as much as, if not more than, your mind. There is also a power granted to critical discourse. Painting and abstraction can of course be included in that discourse, though it's more difficult to initiate as a gap in translation exists.

SARAH CAIN
2008 California Biennial
2008

Page 2

As You Continue to Walk Forward, 2008
Sketch for mixed-media installation, Orange County Museum of Art
Courtesy of the artist; Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco; and Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York



JH: Who or what has inspired your practice? Which artists are relevant to you?

SC: Poetry, music, nature, or a walk down a city street all find their way into my work. The spirit of a great music show is something I relate to. When the music transcends the musicians and hits the audience on a physical and emotional level, there is an urgency there that is similar to an important urgency in my practice. I love the drawings of the Shakers (United Society of Believers) as well as their ideas of artist as instrument. This parallels Jack Spicer's ideas regarding the poet as receiver. Bernadette Mayer is another poet/spirit who I'm inspired by. The way in which Mary Heilmann and, more recently, Amy Sillman approach painting through sculpture is relevant to me. Sillman's way of thinking is very close to my own. Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison are important to me for the way in which they control chaos, as well as the simultaneous feelings of "fuck you" and celebration present in their work. I feel that I share a certain sensibility with Richard Tuttle. Finally, Ree Morton makes a lot of sense to me in her use of space and materials as well as her talismanic approach to art.