



SARAH EMERSON ATLANTA

Sarah Emerson's paintings come off soft and sweet before they hit you with a wallop of dread and despair. The artist hits so many gorgeously discordant notes of pleasure and fear in the same canvas that you feel intellectually unbalanced and woozy in the best way possible. The anxiety that has always characterized Emerson's sugar-pretty paintings has only intensified in her latest exhibition *Soft Trap*, a meditation on nature and death executed in soft avocados, toilet-bowl-cleaner blues, dusty buttercreams—the color scheme of nurseries and the Martha Stewart empire (Whitespace Gallery; September 4—October 10, 2009). Emerson wields that creamy, butter-mint color palette with authority. As the work takes us for a trip down the rabbit hole, her palette gives way to intense neon color jolts that intoxicate and seduce. While artists like Jeff Koons might work a degree of winking snark into such juxtapositions of Bambi deer with bloody mouths, Emerson's ambitions are clearly more poetic and dire, infused with an utterly unique sensibility that feels girl-invested without being precious, tender without being maudlin.

Emerson merges conceptual rigor with ecstatic investment in the world she pictures. The paintings depict a natural world where blood and hunger compromise the otherwise lovely "future Eden" she envisions. Grasshoppers feast with blood-smearing mouths. A doe and buck graze in a glade of skeletons, and the air of delight has an undercurrent of horror. The sylvan rapture in glades and forest nooks can feel as emotionally set-designed as a Disney film or the frozen fantasias of paint-by-numbers. *Soft Trap*, 2009, an acrylic and rhinestones on canvas, typifies Emerson's queasy blend of magic and mayhem, as art nouveau-meets-Henry Darger sylphs lounge on tree branches over a tranquil pool. Bright candy-fruit drop into the water, creating fat pools of color. And on the banks, a skull—one of Emerson's ever-present memento mori—bears silent witness, tainting the paradisiacal splendor. *Icky Lush*, 2009, is a typical blend of sweetness and head-trip in which a deer—standing in for our own point of view—gazes out over a lake that drips like an infinity pool into

the pitch-black cosmos beyond. Enormous ringed planets and a hulking gray moon lurk in the distance, suggesting some out-of-order universe colliding with our own. A cartoonish explosion on the moon—a dramatic smack!—may explain the harvest of radiated-looking plants in gaudy Magic Rock shades in the foreground. This crazed, neon-bright bounty is just one indication of Emerson's environmental agenda, to warn of a natural world threatened with devastation.

One of Emerson's most arresting, evocative, and conceptual touches is the application of tiny plastic jewels on her paintings: a small pink gem on a flower petal or clear sparkle on a blade of grass lends the work a magical, charmed sensibility. In the fat-individual smears of color that evoke paint-by-numbers, Emerson again reveals her hand in purposefully manufacturing this false paradise. Time and again, her way with technique and content affirms a cleverly executed intellectual enterprise.

Emerson has tried a new tack in *The Final Girl*, 2009, a series of charcoal on vellum drawings arranged on one gallery wall in unique frames like family portraits. The drawings, whose execution ranges from purposefully crude to artful, represent a variety of horror movie heroines, including Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* and Sissy Spacek from Brian de Palma's *Carrie*. The girls are both traumatized and exploratory. The jumping off point for the drawings is *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, a 1992 academic text in which Carol Clover argues that slasher films are often defined by the triumphal point of view of a virginal "final girl" who manages to outwit the killer and survive. Edged with darkness, the work suggests a feminine take on the heavy-metal fabulism of Banks Violette or a hardened twist on female will with echoes of Elizabeth Peyton. Though Emerson's artist statement can stretch a connection between *The Final Girl* and *Soft Trap*, these works are best seen as stand-alone affirmations of her ongoing whip-smart, gender-infused exploration of innocence corrupted.

—Felicia Feaster

MARK-MAKING: DOTS, LINES AND CURVES AUSTIN, TX

Mark-Making: Dots, Lines and Curves, the exhibition title, is somewhat of a misnomer (Lora Reynolds Gallery; July 11—September 19, 2009). It could imply that the featured works are invested in formalism above all else, that is, the doctrinaire proscriptions of Johannes Itten rather than the metaphysical musings of Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*. Thankfully, the works on view demonstrate a wide range of artistic intentions and interests that bypass parochial or ideological essentialisms.

For instance, Fred Sandback and Ed Ruscha rely on two widely divergent strategies. Sandback's spare marriage of minimal form with strict utilitarian purpose stands in sharp contrast with Ruscha's use of image and text for enigmatic visual puns. This happens again and again throughout this exhibition. While striking differences abound, they are held together by an elegant tension between abstract reduction and the quiet intimacy of touch. Even though Ruscha's *Ghost*, 1986, evokes signage or advertising, the soft velvety texture of the acrylic on paper allows the white glow to hum behind each letter. Similarly, the relative smallness of Sandback's *Blue Day-glo Corner Piece*, 1968/2004, shows us that one can engage with architecture in discrete fragmented moments, much as a line bends in contraposition to a corner.

A number of younger artists are also included in the exhibition. Their work evokes similar tensions. Kate Shepherd has transferred straight graphite lines onto flat grounds of muted color. While less architectural than her previous work, these planes still evoke spaces that have a particular rhythm. Graham Dolphin draws on found album covers such as classics by Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra and Johnny Cash, covering these iconic faces with a veil of black wavering concentric circles. Like a tantric paean to musical celebrity, these images seem strangely ritualistic.

Noriko Ambe and Tara Donovan merge sculpture and drawing by treating the picture plane as something to be cracked or punctured. Ambe's *Cracking*, 2006, looks like a fissure creeping across the wide white swath of paper. But this crack has been meticulously cut

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Sarah Emerson, *Swarm*, 2009, acrylic and rhinestones on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (courtesy of the artist and Whitespace Gallery, Atlanta); Cordy Ryman, *Bars*, 2008, acrylic and enamel on wood, 12.5 x 12.5 inches (courtesy of the artist and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin)



DAMIÁN ORTEGA BOSTON

through layer upon layer of paper until a deep rift emerges at the center of the page. Each of Donovan's three untitled ink-on-paper drawings looks like a window or mirror that, centrally punched, shatters into concentric shards.

Ceal Floyer's *Ink on Paper*, 2009, continues this fusion between drawing and performative sculpture. Each elliptical shape of color is made by pressing a pen or marker to the page until it purges its contents. This simple gesture evokes all sorts of notions about what it means to fill an art object with content. For instance, where does that content come from? Is the gesture a trace of the subjectivity, emotions or state of mind of the artist? Or does pure materiality determine the truth of an art object? Rather than dictating answers to these questions, Floyer opens them up in a way that is at once direct and oblique.

Cordy Ryman's small quirky assemblage pieces have greater kinship with the playfulness of Richard Tuttle than the more puritan tendencies of his father Robert Ryman. While they also combine sculpture and drawing,

they have a dumb and blunt comeliness that contrasts with the grace and rigor of Sandback. Mitzi Pederson's *Untitled*, 2009, falls somewhere between the two. Small wooden blocks sit on the floor, anchoring sculptural lines made of two long thin pieces of wood covered in silver leaf. They look like feet, enabling long spindly legs to lean up against the wall.

While the exhibition itself is a performance in itself, the show moves back and forth between sculpture, painting, photography and printmaking. By contrast to narrow academic formalism, this interdisciplinarity shows that contemporary practice has little use for divisions between media. Yet, the show's inclusion of artists from many generations demonstrates that this is not a new concept. Tony Smith, the oldest artist included, was famous for his constant shifts between painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture.

The works of Daniel Zeller and Terry Winters provide another interesting generational comparison. Both artists make images that hover between micro-views

of cellular shapes and map-like macro-organizations of form. While Winters' work is open and painterly, Zeller's is precise and intricate. Winters was of a generation still deeply influenced by the ubiquity of Abstract Expressionism while the artworld into which Zeller emerged as an artist was much more open and diverse, allowing for the co-existence of various possibilities for expression. Beautifully refined, *Mark-Making* celebrates this diversity with a quiet excitement.

—Noah Simblist

Given the current post-medium climate—where multi-disciplinary artists reign supreme in both the marketplace and conceptual fortitude—the success of contemporary practitioners is not contingent on the ability of one's hand. Instead it is the connections, even the disconnections, one makes that separate the banal from the unbelievable. Many artists draw influence from their surroundings, and Mexico City—which has seen a meteoric rise to art mecca status recently—is the home of several artists now working abroad whose work is composed of crystal-clear cultural appropriations, including Gabriel Kuri, Abraham Cruzvillegas, and Damián Ortega, all mentored by Gabriel Orozco. *Do It Yourself*, the first museum retrospective of Mexican-born Berlin-based Ortega, not only masterfully uses Mexico as a medium but also reveals that the grandest of statements can be said with incredibly modest means (Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA); September 18, 2009—January 18, 2010).

It would be misleading to say that "folkloricized" works of art are anachronistic, as Ortega's exhibition at the ICA clearly demonstrates. Curated by Jessica Morgan, curator of contemporary art at the Tate Modern, and organized by ICA associate curator Randi Hopkins, the show features works from the last fifteen years, often made from found objects like used furniture, oil barrels, and even tortillas, and exhibited in a giant gallery where unforeseen connections are demonstrated between unlikely pairings. In each work, however, Ortega appears to reveal something we might have already known, presented or approached in a way we did not anticipate. *120 Days*, 2002, features a hundred and twenty variations of the classic Coca-Cola glass bottle, a symbol of Mexican consumerism, scattered atop a shelf along the gallery's north wall. Based on a series of drawings not shown here, the bottles are recognizable at first—the standard hourglass figure, as familiar as that of a woman. They become increasingly foreign until they are only identifiable as pieces of glass.

Ortega's fascination with the material qualities of things is matched only by his eagerness to transform

ABOVE: Damián Ortega, *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle, 265 x 276 x 296 inches (collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Eugenio López and the Jumex Fund for Contemporary Latin American Art)