

The Uses of Pleasure: Michelle Grabner at James Cohan



Installation view of "Michelle Grabner" (2014), James Cohan Gallery, New York (all images courtesy of James Cohan Gallery unless otherwise stated)

What most struck me about the now notorious Michelle Grabner review in the October 24th edition of *The New York Times* was that it was, unusually, surrounded by reviews of other painters. Art critics are allowed to write whatever they want. But it was interesting that the others reviewed (Sharon Horvath, Lucky DeBellevue, Genieve Figgis, and E'wao Kagoshima) were all of a category that might be called "additive": paintings intent upon satiating the ravenous eye, utilizing lots of built-up surfaces and manipulated imagery, pattern and/or narrative. Grabner, who is also a painter, does work of another kind.

I saw the show before any reviews and liked it because the exhibition was reminiscent of a way of working in Europe, particularly France, where it is an intellectual responsibility for the painter to address the limits of painting. I am thinking specifically of Clément Rodzielski's September exhibition at Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris, in which the artist "questions" the status of the traditional painting by making the picture in lots of different ways, including puncturing large sheets of cardboard and painting with a brush around the holes, painting on anodized aluminum plates, etc. Through this process a form of poetics opens up; there is room for content, for metaphor that does not rely on narrative.

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Installation view of Clément Rodzielski's "Fraises noires" (2014) (Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo by Florian Kleinefenn)

There are many artists who are intent upon deconstructing the painting in various ways, historically, politically even behaviorally, such as Josh Smith, who is not an imagist or neo-expressionist but a painter who opened up the process itself by a complete de-centering, making painting after painting the way a copy machine runs off leaflets, (which often turn up in his paintings). Along with his sometime associates Kelley Walker and Wade Guyton, they avail themselves of printing and other copying processes in order to problematize where to locate the autonomous gesture by a singular author.



Josh Smith, "Untitled" (2010), mixed media on panel, 96 x 144 inches (courtesy Luhring Augustine)

Similarly but also very different is Grabner's SAIC colleague Gaylen Gerber, the subject of an essay in the October *Artforum*, where he is discussed in terms of Institutional Critique, but also as a painter: painting walls, often in gray, before hanging other artist's works on them, even

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

painting (covering with paint) canonical objects, such as African sculptures or a Lucio Fontana multiple. In all of these cases the beginning point is a manipulation of the material reality of the painting form. This is contemporary grammar for indicating that the artist is concerned with what painting is and what it could be. Rather than imposing frantically variegated activity upon the confines of a rectangular surface, this way of dealing with the painting may well be the most promising.



Installation view, Gaylen Gerber, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon, Dijon, France, 2005 (with 15th century Swiss primitive painting) (courtesy Wallspace Gallery, NY)

Michele Grabner's open and airy exhibition is in this territory. She alludes to the problem of the physical picture in some of the statements in the accompanying video (*A few minutes with Michelle Grabner*, made in collaboration with her husband, Brad Killam) such as, when a question is brought up comparing painting and weaving, she comments that they "are both structures based on textiles," and later when she states that her paintings (and *Painting*, presumably) reinforce social and historical values.

The ideal of the painting as a comprehensive or totalizing entity is, in a sense, the invisible subject that is argued over or "deconstructed" — both for and against — everywhere in the Grabner exhibition: the weave being a historical metaphor for the matrix of strands (canvas) where the substance (paint) is suspended and the subject is located.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



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These strands, referring to the painting as a form (i.e. historically made of color and cloth) also comprise its anthropological, historical and political history. Grabner uses panels, for the most part, and not canvas as a support for her paintings, but in a conjoining of strand and substance, she also makes series of portable rectangles out of woven strips of colored paper.

In the video, we see Grabner assembling and baking braided crusts on pies, which provide an implied critique to the weavings of colored-paper-strips she is making, presumably while the pies are baking: domestic space is conflated with the traditional studio, a male preserve where paintings are made. The mildly ironic tone of the video, conscious of coming across as Martha Stewart, seems to suggest that the artist is also aware that these are perhaps timeworn feminist issues but nonetheless relevant to the present.



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JAMES COHAN GALLERY

It's also interesting, and important, I think, to note that the artist refers to the activity of making these works as a pleasure. She says that the Color-Aid she uses "is super-saturated pigment silk-screened onto paper support." A collaboration with the workers who manufactured it is taking place. The woven paper drawings, done by combining flat strips of white with one color, such as turquoise, peach, aqua, violet or plum, are each a unique pattern based on a simple arithmetical formula (shown being made in the video).

These woven works are not displayed casually in the gallery but further composed in an all-over pattern — laid out, as if on a tabletop, on large, wide rectangular plinths. The plinth in the front space is around the height that a child could reach. Above it on the wall hang eight color photographs of details of layered gingham, arranged in a generically modernist, geometric formation. An odd, ghostly white rectangle, a product of the weave, floats through some of the photographic images, edging the group towards an ensemble.



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In the gallery's main room, above a low plinth holding another grouping of cut-paper woven patterns, Grabner has hung a large mobile (also a collaboration with Killam), which includes, along with a color photograph of Grabner in her garden, a large circular disc composed of flattened garbage lids and two tondo paintings by Grabner. The shield-like assemblage of lids is balanced on the other end of a metal shaft by two pieces of children's furniture, one cast in concrete.

Recently posted on Grabner's Facebook page is a reproduction of a particularly nasty late figurative painting by Philip Guston that features a goodly number of garbage can lids, a symbol that began appearing in his work of the thirties. Guston's garbage can lids reference both war and (in his work of the 1930s) childhood. Grabner's mobile might be about domestic

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

harmony and the always-looming threat of its disturbance, or maybe art and war in balance with home and family.

Grabner's works on panels and on canvas stretched over panels most closely approximate traditional paintings. These rectangles and squares were made from impressions of crocheted blankets. The surfaces — slight, low reliefs where the negative areas in the knits become discretely tessellated protuberances — resemble polished porcelain. They evoke a world of baby teeth, the discovery of textures and forms in the pre-verbal state. The paintings manage to be mild without being sweet; the innocence associated with the readily identifiable weaves of a baby blanket is corrupted, dirtied, by the residue of the enamel spray used to print them on the surface. In the color versions in the next room, done with the same method, they become slightly surrealist in their quiet transformation of the everyday.



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The strengths of the exhibition would not exist were it not for the deliberately unobtrusive but calculatingly stubborn visuality that is apparent throughout. Must we be reminded that visuality is a quality that involves sustaining and deepening our visual interest during periods of extended scrutiny? It is not a quality that can be exhausted and is very different from dazzle. Dazzle involves spectacle, a commodity to be consumed.

For many of us, our belief in painting came from the experience of standing in front of one and thinking along with it. It represented a uniquely sensuous form of cerebration. The more time one takes with the exhibition, the more structures appear that are both subtle and complex, such as the patterns formed in the reflective surfaces of the garbage can lids and how they rhyme with the foliage in the photograph. The lush summer garden, a prominent presence in the video, one realizes, is another form of pattern. The ideal of a fully achieved picture is secreted within the very mildness of how the woven cut-paper strips are presented and how much

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

pleasure was involved in the way everything here has been carefully planned and executed then served forth.

Michelle Grabner *continues at the James Cohan Gallery (533 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 15.*