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## MICHELLE GRABNER with Barry Schwabsky

by Barry Schwabsky



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

On the occasion of her recent exhibitions at Green Gallery, Milwaukee, and Shane Campbell Gallery, Oak Park, Illinois, Barry Schwabsky took a road trip with Michelle Grabner during which they discussed her paintings as well as the curatorial projects she runs with her husband Brad Killam, The Suburban in Oak Park (formerly the garage behind their house) and the Poor Farm in Little Wolf, Wisconsin. The conversation concluded over tea in Michelle's kitchen.

**Barry Schwabsky (Rail):** All right so here we are, we're on the road from Chicago, about how long do we have to go until Milwaukee?

**Michelle Grabner:** At this point we're going around Kenosha. We are just over the state line, so we're looking at 40 minutes.

**Rail:** When I first knew you, you were teaching in Milwaukee, isn't that right?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** That is right. Before taking a tenure track position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison I was teaching high school art at a prep school in Brown Deer, one of Milwaukee's affluent northern suburbs. It was a K-12 school, so as faculty, my kids could attend this private school receiving tuition remission, dodging Milwaukee's perpetually struggling public school system.

**Rail:** So you're attached to this Milwaukee art situation in some way?

**Grabner:** I was born in Oshkosh and grew up in the Fox River Valley. After high school I headed to the big city, attending the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where I received my B.F.A. and then stuck around for an M.A. in art history. After graduate school at UWM, I went to Northwestern, completing an M.F.A. in 1990. Almost immediately my husband, Brad Killam, and I moved back to Milwaukee. I was pregnant with my second child so Milwaukee seemed manageable in terms of supporting a young family and starting careers as artists. Here we could arrange our life so that part-time teaching could sustain dedicated studio practices while raising two young kids. Chicago is vastly more expansive and more expensive so we thought that Milwaukee was the better option for us coming out of graduate school. It was a great decision. I regret moving to Chicago seven years later, and thinking that was our only viable option as artists living in the Midwest.



Michelle Grabner, Cottage Works installation view. Green Gallery East, Milwaukee. February 2012.

**Rail:** Let's step back for a minute. When you went to college, were you already going with the idea of becoming an artist?

**Grabner:** I went to college with the idea of being an artist and a teacher. I recognized that sustaining a relatively conventional lifestyle—family, kids, a mortgage—needed financial and emotional stability so I always kept teaching in the fore as an obvious means to integrate art and family life. An M.A. in art history was a strategy to land a college teaching job at some small

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

liberal arts school where I could teach art appreciation, studio classes, and art history surveys, giving me an edge over the competition who only sport M.F.A. degrees. It still took seven years to land a full-time teaching post. Ironically, I am now Chair of the Painting and Drawing Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a program that rejected my graduate school application.

**Rail:** As a kid, what were your experiences that led you to think about being an artist, what was your idea about what an artist was and what art was?

**Grabner:** I had an extraordinary high school art teacher who made the idea of being an artist real for me. And although I never knew a working artist growing up, art was not a novel concept. My dad owned a set of oil paints that he used to paint his taxidermy fish. And on occasion he would paint landscape and wildlife pictures. My grandfather made sculptures out of tree roots in addition to carving decoys, hooking rugs, and quilting. He was quite the crafter. I never considered my dad or my grandpa artists, but I also never imagined living life without making aesthetic things with my hands. However, the fact that this could be one's sole work was a thrilling revelation to me thanks to the worldliness of my high school art teacher.

**Rail:** So we fast forward to the present and this young person who had this idea that maybe she could teach art appreciation and also make some art and have a family and so on, does have a family and is making art, and in my view giving an incredible example of how to work in a, let's say, second-tier city in terms of the art market and connecting to an international art circuit, and doing it on your own terms in a really non-provincial and very conscious manner. Now how did that all come about?



Michelle Grabner, "Untitled," 2011. Flash and black gesso on canvas. 80" diameter.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** Yes, that's well-articulated. I simply refuse to participate in Chicago's provincial disposition.

**Rail:** Maybe I should also say that one of the things that's made me think about that is I've just been starting to read an anthology that's been published of writings from the *New Art Examiner*, and I'm reading right now the early ones from the '70s. The sense of the embattled provincial, I have to say, is very strong in that writing. The *New Art Examiner* really did reach out to national and to some extent international scenes, but at the same time there is that sense of being embattled.

**Grabner:** That battle rages on today and I find it exhausting. It is hugely frustrating and culturally wasteful. This is why I have no esteem for Chicago and prefer the social and cultural landscape of Milwaukee. Great amounts of creative energy are still being wasted on promoting and reinforcing outdated cultural hierarchies or on criteria of success adapted from New York. I work very hard not to get caught up in that very real "second city" or "fly-over" psychology. Instead I work within the freedoms and resources that this city provides. To maintain a rigorous art practice here, artists need to set their own criteria, continuously measuring and contextualizing their work. And this is more difficult than one might think because, unlike New York, Chicago is shockingly slight on critical, economic, and professional support.

**Rail:** Although there are plenty of big collectors in Chicago.

**Grabner:** And they go to New York to buy the majority of their work, as they should. But back to your question, "how I'm able to do it?" By foregrounding the alternative and reveling in its off-center potential instead of succumbing to Chicago's unremarkable and fraught identity as a cultural center.

**Rail:** So tell me how *The Suburban* fits into that, how it came about.

**Grabner:** Initially it came from a place of youthful idealism. But our friend David Robbins—and his research in the contemporary imagination, specifically his claim that the suburbs are an over-looked site for avant-garde activities—was also a driving force behind *The Suburban*. When we were living in Milwaukee, we knew we had to step it up so as not to fall out of the conversations we left behind in graduate school. So while in Milwaukee I started writing for *Frieze* and curating exhibitions. We moved from Milwaukee back to Chicago in 1997 and some of that attitude just came with us. A year after moving back to Chicago, Brad and I, along with the Danish critics Lars Bang Larsen and Jacob Fabricius, curated *Bicycle Thieves*, a citywide exhibition of contemporary Danish art including work by Peter Land, Elmgreen and Dragset, N55, Superflex, Tal R, Ann Lislegaard, Annika Ström, and many others who made projects at museums, galleries, and artist-run spaces during the summer of 1998. Opening *The Suburban* in 1999 continued to bring the international art world to us. Since then we have worked with 200 artists from Sydney to St. Louis.

**Rail:** Given what you said about the lack of a market here, how has *The Suburban* supported itself?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** The Suburban operates within the economy of our household. Brad and I are fortunately privileged to be full-time art faculty at two very different kinds of institutions here in Chicagoland. The Suburban has never entertained any commercial ambition. And on that rare occasion when somebody's interested in buying a Walead Beshty glass FedEx box, we will direct that interested party to Walead, or to his commercial gallery. We support a lot of things at The Suburban but negotiating a commercial sale is not something that interests us.

**Rail:** I've heard that it was Luc Tuymans who sought out The Suburban to exhibit, rather than the other way round, is that true?

**Grabner:** It is true. And it is a good story about generosity and alternative thinking. Luc and his artist wife Carla Arocha attended an opening at Suburban. I believe it was an opening for an exhibition by David Robbins. They were in town because Carla just opened a show at a commercial gallery here. A couple of weeks later Luc emailed from Antwerp and asked if he could show one painting at The Suburban. Initially we were hesitant because we didn't carry art insurance for our little space. But after discussing this, we determined that hosting a Tuymans painting in our concrete block gallery in the yard of our suburban house would be an exciting critical gesture for all parties. Needless to say we purchased an insurance rider. The painting went to an American collector and Luc's Antwerp gallery, Zeno X, saw fit to donate a percentage of that sale to The Suburban. We put that generous gift into erecting another building on our property in Oak Park that includes two more exhibition spaces.

**Rail:** What's in the spaces now?

**Grabner:** The small gallery features a project by Pam Lins, a New York-based artist, and the larger space hosts an exhibition curated by MINUS SPACE that includes paintings by Mark Dagley, Gabriele Evertz, and Gilbert Hsiao. The MINUS SPACE show is unusual as we typically present one-person exhibitions. The third gallery here on our corner property in Oak Park is used by Shane Campbell Gallery as a project space.

**Rail:** And then, that wasn't enough, so you had to start the Poor Farm, too?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY



The Poor Farm, Waupaca County Wisconsin.

**Grabner:** We're getting old and isn't that what city-dwelling, middle-age couples do: buy a property in the country? We already had a little cottage and studio in Wisconsin when we purchased the Poor Farm. On Memorial Day weekend in 2008 we were heading home to Chicago when I turned to Brad, reminding him that my survey show that had been touring university galleries in the heartland was coming to a close and that all those crates of art were going to be returned. I asked him where he thought we should store them as we drove past the old Waupaca Poor Farm, the huge old institution located directly across the highway from our cottage. The place was ours by August.

**Rail:** What does it mean, the old poor farm?

**Grabner:** The history of the poor farm is interesting. This particular poor farm and hundreds like it are part of the American Poor Farm System that arose in the 1850s. It was a progressive social movement. Prior to the American Poor Farm or Poorhouse System, if someone became destitute they were likely to be sold into servitude. The American Poorhouse System is based on the 19th-century English almshouses. If you were assigned to a poor farm or a poorhouse, you were an inmate who labored for room and board. Our poor farm was built in 1876. It has a jail cell in the basement and a graveyard in the back field. Originally it was a 97-acre working farm. Often insane asylums were built in proximity to the poor farms and poorhouses, ganging the institutions that accounted for the societal misfits. When the American Social Security Act came into play in the 1930s, many poor farms became state-run old folks' homes. Not such a good idea for running 97 acres of rural property. Eventually they were sold off into private hands. It's a fascinating, little-known part of American history. The poor farm cemetery accompanying our poor farm has a suicide row that lies just outside the hallow delineation of the cemetery proper. Life was hard. Approximately 280 people lived and died at our poor farm over the course of its history. And records indicate that these were mostly men, the majority of them immigrants from Northern Europe.

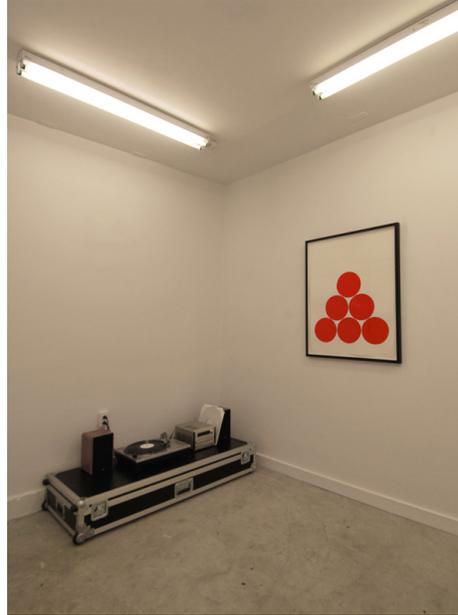
# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

The result is a solid, unadorned institutional building that looms sturdy among the pastures and farm fields. Over the years, add-on buildings were necessary to house the growing number of destitute. The large building attached to the back of the main structure functions as a dormitory where artists stay. We shy away from the idea of a proper artists' residency and opt for something more informal and flexible. This has included hosting classes from the University of Minnesota and Columbia College. And each summer we host Summer School, a free school comprised of a mix of students and faculty from colleges in and around the Twin Cities. But back to your question, yes, as middle-aged, mid-career artists, we build art practice and discourse into everything that we do. So the Poor Farm is nothing more than The Suburban's rural cousin with large amounts of exhibition space.

**Rail:** Okay, and what's going on or coming up at the Poor Farm, then?

**Grabner:** Something truly exciting. The past couple of years our programming has been quite organic. We've had artists from Baltimore to Auckland stay and make exhibitions, films, and performances at the Poor Farm. Last summer we hosted Guillaume Leblon, a French artist who pulled large slabs of concrete and earth from around the Poor Farm property, installing them in the main gallery. This upcoming summer we are working with New York artist and curator Philip Vanderhyden on a Gretchen Bender survey exhibition that will feature her large-scale video installations. Bender died in 2004. It is puzzling that no other institution has embraced her critical contribution to art and media. There is a good chance that this exhibition will travel to the Kitchen in NYC and then to the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina after that. We're producing a catalogue as well. This Bender project is hugely exciting and I take great pride in the fact that a scrappy kunsthalle in northeastern Wisconsin is developing historical content as well as supporting experimental projects and exhibitions by contemporary artists. In 2010, the Poor Farm was dedicated to the art historian Moira Roth. The project took the contour of a festschrift that included contributions by Annika Marie, Janet Kaplan, Chuck Mobley, and David Horvitz, Linda Nochlin, Suzanne Lacy, Dinh Q. Lê, Slobodan Paich, and many others who have been impacted by this extraordinary scholar and educator.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Henrik Plenge Jakobsen, *The Suburban*, 2009. Installation detail.

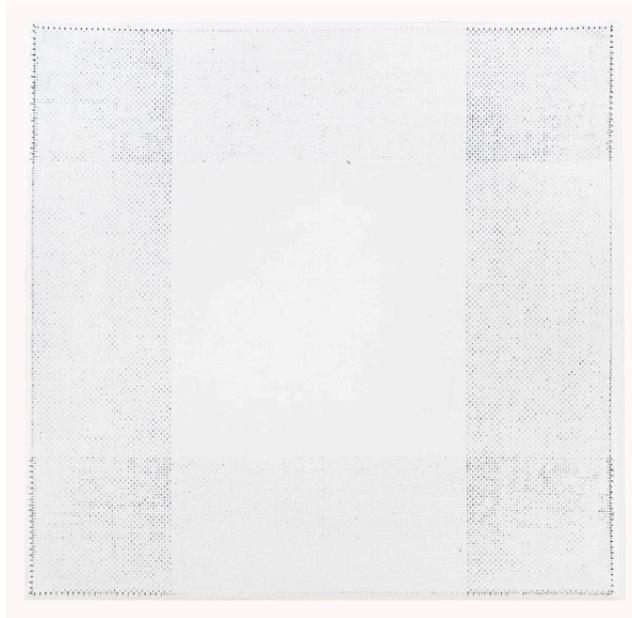
**Rail:** It's interesting to me that basically a lot of the art that was very much in the air when I was first in New York and first becoming interested in art is now up for historical reexamination. It makes me feel old. I must be historical, too, then. But Gretchen Bender's work and then a lot of the other work out of the same milieu, seems to be such a quintessentially urban work and it carries something of the atmosphere of the New York of that time and of the grittiness of the rather depressed and alienated ethos of the time, which was articulated first through punk rock and then through some of the visual manifestations that followed. I can't help but wonder what that's going to be like in the middle of rural Wisconsin and how it will look different or feel different or how it will speak differently there.

**Grabner:** That's exactly right and this is why her work is striking renewed interest. And yes, Bender's theater-scaled video performances will seem profoundly incongruent set within a context of rural space. Hopefully this will set up an ideal space to understand and reconsider her work. To be perfectly honest, the Bender project sprang from a curatorial project that I'm working on for Marianne Boesky Gallery that will open at the gallery's 64th street location on May 2. The show is titled *25 Years of Talent* and uses David Robbins's renowned photo composition "Talent" as a curatorial conceit. "Talent" was made in 1986 and is comprised of 18 black and white headshots of the artists who are familiar to Nature Morte and early Metro Pictures. The artists featured include Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Robert Longo, Michael Byron, Ashley Bickerton, Robin Weglinski, Allan McCollum, Jennifer Bolande, Jenny Holzer, Clegg & Guttman, Joel Otterson, Alan Belcher, Peter Nagy, Larry Johnson, Steven Parrino, Tom Lawson, and David Robbins. Gretchen Bender was also one of the "talented."

**Rail:** One could easily be very surprised that someone who does the kind of work you do as an artist, a rather meditative form of painting, is particularly interested in the work of someone like Gretchen Bender. Is there an interrelation or is it simply that you have multiple interests and they're not all manifested through your own work?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** Indeed, I have multiple interests, but it is also worth noting that this work and its criticality imprinted on me when I was in graduate school in the late '80s. My master's thesis was titled, "Postmodernism: A Spectacle of Reflexivity" and included many of those orbiting in Bender's world, like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine. In my studio, appropriation and critique indirectly weave through my work as I deal in found compositions and unoriginal methods of composition and production. The fact is that The Suburban, the Poor Farm, curating, writing, and teaching are super social endeavors and they often evoke various critical positions. But yes, my studio is not social.



Michelle Grabner, "Untitled," 2011. Linen and gesso on panel. 16 x 16".

**Rail:** Yeah, I think a lot of that work from the '80s really had to do with the overload of noise to signal, to use the terms of information theory. With the way that the noise of society was, in a way, impinging on and decreasing the space of individuality, rationality, clarity. In your painting you're also working with things that are found in the culture at large and are common things rather than necessarily highly individualized things. But there's a sense of clarity there which communicates that to me through those common things. You've found a place where you can be yourself and not be pushed aside by the noise of the media.

**Grabner:** That's exactly right. It is so interesting that you bring up alienation and the loss of self in a lot of the '80s work by the fact we are still faced with profound alienation, ironically amid vast fields of social networking. It's the space of rearticulation, of repetition, that happens in the studio that gives clarity to my social-oriented endeavors.

**Rail:** Also interesting is that when a tool is new, it's not clear yet what can and can't be done with it, and it's also not clear yet how to control and channel from above what can be done with it. I think we're still in that early stage with a lot of social networking and other new media. I don't think they're inherently liberatory, but I think that they have more liberatory potential when they're new, and what they can do is relatively unknown, than they will later on.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** Perhaps that is why I have been spending a lot of time thinking about the necessity for creating a studio scenario built on situational boredom. I am finding confidence in David Foster Wallace's belief in boredom as a necessary human condition. Of course I am not talking about the crippling, existential kind, but boredom that recontours our relationship to time and social networking, a condition absent of distraction, or as Dave Hickey puts it, absent of static. I am interested in how ideas emerge, grow, and sustain themselves within this condition. Positive boredom is contentment. I am positively content in the studio but endlessly unnerved and anxious in my other work.

**Rail:** So here we are at the Milwaukee Art Museum. We'll continue this later.

**Rail:** Alright, bye-bye Milwaukee. Now we're here in Oak Park, in your living room. It's been a real pleasure to see your shows at the Green Gallery in Milwaukee and here in Oak Park with Shane Campbell Gallery, and to see in a way what looks like a real expansion of your project as a painter. I think you're using the metaphor of fabric and taking it in a lot of different directions. It's a big change from the white dot on black ground paintings that I last saw a few years ago.



Michelle Grabner, "Untitled," 2011. Embroidery floss on linen. 20 x 21".

**Grabner:** These two shows are a resolute return to the ideas shaping the work I was making 20 years ago when I was painting patterns pulled from my domestic environment: crocheted blankets, paper towel patterns, etc. In the early '90s I was attracted to these familiar motifs for their order and predictability. I was not very interested in them as domestic middle-class signifiers. I started receiving a great deal of critical response to these paintings in terms of the politics of "women's work," and how that was intertwining with ideas in contemporary abstraction. But it was really Platonic ideals of routine and orderliness I was seeking to find by rearticulating my domestic backdrops.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Rail:** So did it disappoint or disturb you that people were finding, or emphasizing different ideas in your work than the ones that you thought you were putting in?

**Grabner:** This was very early on in my career, so to some extent I was just pleased to be part of a conversation about abstract painting. Yet because I had explored these political issues in graduate school, it seemed especially odd that these academic concerns reemerge just when I was developing my own conceptual course and painting vocabulary. So slowly, I abandoned the domestic referent and my search for systems of order in the daily life, turning instead to simple math and counting formulas, Archimedes spiral, and basic radial compositions.

**Rail:** What's the Archimedes spiral?

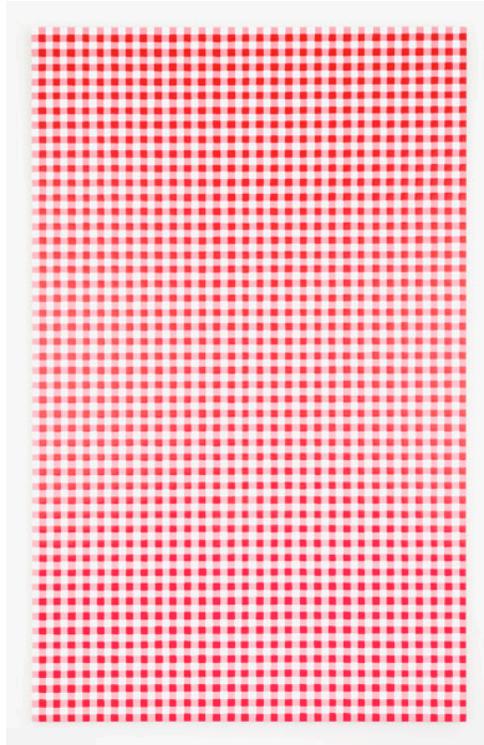
**Grabner:** It is a spiral where the distance between the arms or the windings is constant, unlike a Fibonacci Spiral or a golden spiral that grows wider every quarter turn. So with the black tondo paintings, I start with a point just off center and then keep rotating outward until a point falls off the canvas face. Then the work is finished. These paintings appear as if they are comprised of concentric circles but this is not the case. They end up being extraordinarily optical, and I find them vulgar. Anyway, the new work that is currently on view in Milwaukee and Oak Park is a revisiting of domestic motifs, especially gingham. Some of my interest in rethinking that work has a lot to do with the fact that my domestic environment has changed. Our two boys are off at college and Ceal, my seven-year-old daughter, is still all sweetness and light. I have tenure and more resources. Those tropes culled from a domestic frame don't unnerve me the way they did in the '90s. Now I can bring them to the fore and embrace their low-brow cliché with abandon.

**Rail:** The new gingham patterning is still very optical, still.

**Grabner:** Yeah.

**Rail:** You say "yeah" with some ruefulness.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Michelle Grabner, "Untitled," 2012. Acrylic and gesso on panel. 40 × 30".

**Grabner:** Well, they don't have the dizzying quality that the 80-inch round canvases exhibit. Yet you are right, especially in tight juxtapositions such as in the hanging at the Green Gallery. But I hope the physicality of the paint curbs some of the optical play. The gingham work is painted without employing tape, thus lacking hard edges. And the paint itself has a viscous enamel-like quality to it—it has body yet it also levels.

**Rail:** They're very tactile.

**Grabner:** Yes, but it's not a tactility that mimics fabric. It's corporeal and it's a grid. Clearly I have perennially struggled with the unintentional variants and subtexts in articulating systems of repetition, systems of mark-making, and pattern-construction. So with the gingham patterns I need the imprecision of my hand and the body of the medium to reaffirm abstract value in this clichéd vernacular motif.

**Rail:** The very pale pink one that's here, I think because of its paleness, doesn't have the optical bounce that, let's say, the red one, the red and white one does. To me it doesn't matter how non-strict the line is, there's still a very sharp contrast between the red and the white that you're working with that just inevitably produces these after-effects—

**Grabner:** That is right. The retina can't avoid making the optical bounce the painting's main event. And as you can tell I am unsettled by the prominence of these effects. The pale painting you are referring to gets its atmospheric quality from the literal transfer of fabric ink into wet gesso. Unlike the gingham work that employs painting as a means to simulate weaving, the transfer paintings are more true to the indexical process I was using in the '90s where I would

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

spray through those domestic backdrops, get an image, and then carefully fill in the positive or negative patterns with glossy enamel.

**Rail:** And then the white paintings—you're taking fabric and pricking out some of the threads? Is that right? And then, as it were, collaging that to the surface of the painting?

**Grabner:** I'm taking found scraps of burlap and linen, and removing some of the warp and weft material to create pattern. I then embed these weavings under layers of gesso, hopefully confounding painting and weaving, subject and support. Again, I create all-over pattern from the fabric's intrinsic grid structure but the result of embedding them in gesso makes them akin to a static plaster relief. This work is influenced from weeks in Switzerland looking at too many Paul Klee paintings. But I also see these paintings in relationship to the work of Eleanore Mikus, Anni Albers, and Sheila Hicks. Last summer I was in a three-person show at Southfirst in Williamsburg called *Women and Weaving* that included work by Polly Apfelbaum and Ariel Dill. The show, organized by Maika Pollack, was sparked by the Sonia Delaunay exhibition at Cooper Hewitt. Anyway this work is my attempt at actually handling and manipulating warp and weft structures instead of re-representing it via painting or drawing.



Lars Breuer, *The Suburban*, 2009. Exterior project.

**Rail:** And are you sanding back into the gesso, then?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** In some of the tight weaves I am sanding through the gesso to reveal color and the topography of fabric.

**Rail:** So really it's a kind of painting in which the support becomes the figure of its own ground, or something like that? I can't quite wrap my head around how! Some distinctions are being collapsed there that we would normally make, I think.

**Grabner:** That's right. These works are firmly grounded in the now defunct tension between painting and weaving, crafts and the fine arts. I hope to reinvigorate some of the power struggles between burlap and linen, the loom and the stretcher, and concepts of labor and work, dichotomies most recently leveled by the free market's objective to bring diversity to market.

**Rail:** How domestic is too domestic? What is that dividing line that one wants to maybe come close to but not cross over?

**Grabner:** Being mid-career, middle-aged, and loving the liberties that come with this location, I'm willing to explore ideas and motifs that may fall flat. But thinking about the possibilities gets my heart racing. I'm glad you brought it up because that's where I'm most interested in situating the new work.

**Rail:** So do you identify yourself as an abstract painter? If someone asked you what you do, is that what you would say?

**Grabner:** I am committed to painting and its ideas. But I prefer thinking about it as a language in relationship to contexts outside itself. With that, I feel most comfortable being identified as a conceptual artist.

**Rail:** And have you ever felt any identification with the so-called pattern and decoration painters of the '70s?

**Grabner:** There's a kind of showy beauty, saturation, and density to that work that I was never able to appreciate. I understand it intellectually but it is too indulgent for my taste. Perhaps I am too middle class. A colleague and neighbor here in Oak Park, Judy Ledgerwood, expertly aligns herself with this movement, its lurid taste, and lifestyle. Roberta Smith aptly wrote in the *Times* last summer that Judy is singlehandedly taking on this movement.

**Rail:** [*Laughs.*] I wonder. Somehow maybe it's the pattern that's O.K. but the decoration is where it—a lot of that also had a kind of strong figurative element, and a strong element of material richness. And, without wanting to put too much weight on these words, and also without even knowing which one you would identify with in terms of your background—I don't know—I would say one is kind of more Catholic and the other seems more Protestant.

**Grabner:** Ironically I was raised Catholic but unquestionably my work embraces a Protestant work ethic and emphasizes textuality over figuration.

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Rail:** And then there's a third type of piece you included in your show at Shane Campbell Gallery, which are black yarn embroidered works on unstretched canvas. And that seems like quite another thing altogether.

**Grabner:** Yeah, I've been working on these clumsy black circle stitcheries thinking about Gertrude Stein's interest in punctuation and her work *Tender Buttons*. These are works that I make in the car as we drive back and forth between Chicago and Wisconsin.

**Rail:** Always those kind of circular forms?

**Grabner:** Yes indeed, I start in the center and spiral out employing a very bulking backstitch. The accumulation of the black yarn and embroidery floss overtakes the linen support and pushes outward creating an absurd breast-like contour.

**Rail:** Well, I was going to ask if Duchamp's "Prière de toucher" was a deliberate reference.



Tony Feher, *The Suburban*, 2006. Installation detail.

**Grabner:** No, not a deliberate reference. Instead they look like something that was wrought from feminist art practice in the '70s so in that way your observation is oddly accurate, a "polite" Midwestern interpretation of Valie Export and Duchamp perhaps.

**Rail:** Any thoughts about the dichotomy that's been there in your work between centralized forms and all-over grids?

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

**Grabner:** I was very determined when I moved from the grid to radial compositions 10 years ago. My recent return to the grid has more to do with taking on the mess of the material world and domestic motifs as signifiers. These references just so happen to be built from warp and weft structures.

**Rail:** One last question, about your referring to yourself as a conceptual artist. And just wondering what it means to say that because, you know, certainly not in the sense of John Baldessari who would hire someone else to paint or execute his concept, and not in the sense of someone who withholds from having a commitment to the medium of paint. As far as one can see when looking at your work or at the development of your work, it's very much involved with the practice of painting as an ongoing activity. Where do you locate the special conceptual dimension?

**Grabner:** A "conceptual" label gives me objective distance from the language. For example, I consider my silverpoint work paintings because they explore painting's purchase on flatness and spatial illusion. It also allows me to think of all the things I do as being interrelated. In other words, I am not that artist who wears "many hats" but instead someone who examines ideas in different ways, whether that is as a writer, curator, teacher, or studio artist. Besides, it is much more difficult to be a conceptual artist. All really good painters are.