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## Sex and Play and Painting: Sarah Faux in conversation with Elena Sisto

by Elena Sisto

Sarah Faux is the subject of an exhibition at Cuevas Tilleard (Tilleard Projects) on the Lower East Side, titled “11am Mirror Hole” (291 Grand Street, between Eldridge and Allen streets, through February 25.) ELENA SISTO met with the artist in May of last year to discuss her show at that time at the Thierry Goldberg Gallery, titled “Seether”. Images with this interview are from the earlier exhibition.



Installation shot of Sarah Faux: Seether at Thierry Goldberg Gallery, 2017

The fluidity between objective and non-objective imagery in the work of Sarah Faux interests me. The use of abstract means ties her to earlier painting traditions such as Synthetic Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, but she comes to a fresh synthesis that has a markedly unstable quality. Rather than seeking a final gestalt, image closure seems deferred almost indefinitely. Her painting has a provisional quality that flies in the face of the high production values and internationalist trend in so much recent art.

**ELENA SISTO:** I'm curious to know how you go about making a painting, the relationship of your technique and your physical identification with the space of the picture. You use quite a variety of techniques in your work: For instance, paint can be both matte and shiny in a single painting, sometimes even within one brushstroke. It looks like each painting is started differently. I'm also interested in the identification of your body or self with the canvas, in part because that is something that also matters to me.

**SARAH FAUX:** For a long time now I have seen the canvas as analogous to a body. It's got a skeletal frame with a skin stretched tight over it. It's rough, smooth, oily and waxy like skin, too, and even has little hairs hanging off its edges. I used to take this analogy to its most literal endpoint, painting rectangular torsos where one torso equals one canvas, really looking at the body as an object.

Now I'm a lot looser with this analogy. I'll work on many surfaces at once, and prepare them differently, starting with raw canvas, or a single color, or an oil stick drawing. While I'm preparing a canvas I can get to know its proportions in relationship to my body. I like to make surfaces that are shifty. A surface in flux can set a whole painting into motion. Just when an image clicks into place, its edges slip on a patch of oil primer.

**And that is meant to keep everything in motion, unsettled, breaking down hierarchies?**

Yes, I want this shiftiness to keep any quick readings at bay. I'm trying to extend that moment between perception and recognition, prolonging the period where the elements of a painting are just taking shape. Maybe as you're looking an image will coalesce for a moment and then fall away. It's like your eye is touching the canvas, rearranging fragments.

**When I'm painting I want something similar, but I want the viewer to think they know what they're seeing at first and then realize that what they thought they saw isn't really there, except in glimpses. You want yours to be a little more slippery.**

How do you achieve that effect in a figurative painting? Through a specific type of touch or materiality?

**Through shifting back and forth constantly between working on the piece narratively and working on it abstractly or thinking about the physicality of the paint. I especially try never to take two narrative steps in a row.**



Sarah Faux, *Breathe Under Water*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 56 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

**We both seem to be interested in the relationship of psychoanalysis to our work and how the self can be conceptualized as a cloud of shifting elements, constantly changing while maintaining some kind of integrity. We both often crop in on our subjects, which to many people would imply a lack of wholeness (cutting off the head of a figure for instance). What about the way social constructs penetrate to the intimate realm? Can you describe the spatial structure of your paintings and the way it supports and provides an arena for these ideas?**

I feel an affinity with your work and how you're able to build a rich internal world for your subjects. I'm trying to do something similar, to crop and isolate a moment of touch between two people, letting the whole painting exist in the interior space between and inside of these bodies. I approach constructing each painting differently, corralling loose puddles of paint into a plaid-like scaffolding in *Too late to be free* or overlaying quick lines on top of a field of gray-blue in *Breathe under water*. I want the process to be analogous to the emotional content of each piece, like trying to contain anger by giving a pour hard edges. I take long periods to look and think between making choices on my paintings. Sometimes I'll take something painted flat on the floor with wet into wet paint and come back into it weeks later to contain those pools of paint with sharp, knifed-on, pressurized shapes.

I'd also say that there's a strong bias toward the narrative in all of our minds, and that a face immediately starts to spin into a story. I'm trying to avoid narrative dominating the somatic, sensory experience of the body, which is present with us always. But we're usually ignoring it, how our body feels. I see those forces battling it out through line versus color. Like the two have a kind of power play going on, where in one painting line and image might dominate and in another the image could be completely subsumed into puddles of yellow.

**So your actual technique or paint handling is more expressive, rather than a gestural brushstroke or a figurative narrative expressionism? It's an age-old conflict between drawing, which is often thought of as more rational, and color, which is thought of as more irrational. So the resolution or non-resolution is different in every case?**

I'm not sure how to define the word expressive, but yes, I am looking for different solutions in each piece. In *E*. I got the most gestural. The painting became a lexicon of drips and marks, semi-linguistic shapes like a giant green letter "E" in loose black parentheses. But that piece is a bit of an exception. In most of these paintings color ends up dominating over gesture or narrative. And ultimately that's an intentional statement, even if it's a consequence of process. I'm advocating for the senses and for the synesthetic power of color to evoke smell, sound, taste. I've been reading a lot of Maggie Nelson lately, along with the rest of Brooklyn, and I loved "Bluets." Through short vignettes she approaches the color blue via her own ex lover, Goethe's color theory, medieval nuns, Joni Mitchell and Joseph Cornell. It's amazing! What a thrilling way to unpack color. I've been keeping it in my head as a working analogy for some deep painting goals.

**How are you choosing colors? Are you working completely intuitively, emotionally, symbolically, spatially, in terms of light? All or none of the above?**

Hmm, it's hard for me to be sure if it's the same driving force each time. I think picking color is the most intuitive part of painting for me. And it's emotional and definitely spatial. I'm drawn to a somewhat pop palette – a lot of straight or just slightly tweaked pigments that suggest nail polish or lipstick shades or maybe commercial packaging and textiles. They're purposefully not naturalistic, both because human behavior is learned and sometimes dictated by commercial forces but also because pure pigments are just so beautiful. I can't resist cobalt, you know? But I'm trying in each piece to let that intense color have a lighting condition as well – backlit, spot lit, dappled light, or even-toned dusk.

**What about manganese, my favorite color. You can't buy it anymore!**

I still use it! But maybe it's imitation manganese?

**Unless you bought it more than a year or so ago, I'm afraid it may be. Does it seem important to protect a certain innocence while you are working? There's a childlike approach to your process. Does this imply a desire to get to an unselfconscious arena within which to play? Is there an effort to reach a place of child-like sexuality?**

Yes, for sure. Without knowing exactly how to put this, I think childhood sexuality is still taboo and the sometimes-childlike nature of adult sexuality is, often, too. Sex and play and painting all feel very connected to me in how they deal with pleasure and power. While I had been under Freud's spell for a while, I got into D.W. Winnicott's ideas about play more recently. Basically, I find a more authentic self comes to light through play than through the narrativizing tendencies of talk therapy. And also that play continues into



Sarah Faux, *Too Late to be Free*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 78 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

adulthood. I wouldn't use the word "innocence" though, because that implies naiveté. I'm an academically trained painter, and I'm not trying to "de-skill". Really I just want to tap into a guttural place, not to paint sex as it appears from the outside, but as it's actually experienced, fraught with expectations, anxieties, constraints. And also with moments of uncomplicated release, where an inner child does come out, or an inner animal. I'm also painting from a feminine perspective and want to do so unabashedly to fight against the shame around women's sexuality.

**I couldn't agree more about not being naive or de-skilled. I meant getting to a place where you're not thinking about what other people think, you're right there in the moment with your work, knowing what the next right step is. I'm glad you emphasize that you are an academically-trained artist.**

Can't deny that! There can be a confidence in being a kid too. And maybe that's what you're getting at. A feeling of certainty.

**Isn't that what Winnicott called "going on being"?**

**I understand you also consider yourself a third generation feminist. Would you talk about that?**

SF: I've always considered myself a feminist, thanks to my mother, I'm sure, and I suppose that makes me third wave. In the sphere of painting, there's a macho ego associated with the New York School and it's an energy I'm drawn to, and that I've been influenced by—de Kooning, Guston, also Frankenthaler and Krasner—but I'm co-opting that bravado for my own means. There's a fair amount of buried anger in these paintings, hence the show's title, *Seether*, which implies a bubbling, seething, libidinal force under the surface. And I tend to organize my compositions from a first person point of view. I want the viewer to see these paintings as extensions of their own body (in the way of Joan Semmel or Nicole Eisenman). Hopefully viewers, whatever gender they may be, will contend with their own role in a scene. Women are forced to read novels or watch movies with male protagonists an inordinate amount of the time. I'm trying to right the scales a little bit.

**Well, I said third generation, I'm not sure what exactly constitutes a wave. I think the identification of the New York School with machismo is a little exaggerated, myself. Were they really so much more macho than anyone else in the culture at the time? And you'd have to say the women were macho then too. Let's not forget how distorted things can get when they are being promoted and marketed. My main issue with A.E. and women is that the women haven't been promoted enough. I think painters in the U.S. have done themselves a great disservice by reacting so strongly against A.E., throwing the baby out with the bathwater.**

I see your point, and I think we're probably agreeing with each other. I'm certainly not throwing out the lessons of Ab Ex or turning away from that tradition, and don't think American painting would benefit from doing so. I was very into Amy Sillman's article a few years ago called "AbEx and Disco Balls". She broke down that gender essentialism we ascribe to AbEx and pointed out that that energy could be seen as fertile as easily as it could be dismissed as being ejaculatory, so why are we so set on labeling AbEx "male"? So maybe I'm revising my earlier comment. I'm a huge fan of Charlene von Heyl, who continues to shape shift while maintaining a deep connection with her material and process. I'd put Dona Nelson in that category, too.

**Earlier you seemed to be mystified by the word "expressive"? Tell me what that is about.**

"Expressive" feels like a historical term to me, and I'm not sure what it means right now. We've been talking about AbEx, but there's also German Expressionism. And geometric abstraction is expressive, political posters are expressive... disconnected from an historical moment, "expressive" feels very general to me. What did you mean by it?

**I'm using the word with a small "e." There's an emotionality to your work without making that your agenda.**

"Emotionality" I can get behind! When we were speaking earlier you'd brought up the difference between psychology vs. emotion in painting, and I'm realizing that emotion might be the stronger force in this group. I'm thinking of emotion as the feelings themselves, which manifest physically and mentally at the same time. And painting is an emotional act for me. If I don't go to my studio for a while, I'm miserable. We tend not to talk about painting as a primal act all the time – opting for a more critical approach to explaining this activity that really consists of manipulating and responding to liquids and colors and textures. So while my paintings are not specifically autobiographical, they do reflect my emotional life.

**I heard a great term the other day: "auto-fiction."**

I loved that Pipilotti Rist video from her New Museum show called "I'm a victim of this song," where she was singing Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" in this creepy screaming childlike voice. Pop music is so good at expressing feelings that play out over and over again in people's lives, like that feeling of falling in love in spite of yourself or that feeling of a pop song penetrating your psyche! This group of paintings is dealing with tenderness, joy, desire, touch, friction, estrangement and all the abstract, unnamable physical