

Sarah Cain: Double Future
Seiler + Mosseri-Marlio Galerie, Zurich

“Failure” has been a commonly coined concern among contemporary artists since the affinity for modernist heroics gave way like so many battered pier pilings oh so long ago. But it’s a particularly common refrain when the subject of painting arises, no doubt as a reaction to the annual “Painting Is Dead” recitations. Nevertheless, “failure”—and its inverse—is an apt point when talking about the geometric abstractions of Sarah Cain, a young LA-based artist. Her candy-colored, kaleidoscopically inclined works on paper and site-specific installations are accommodating nearly to a fault. They court seemingly bad ideas—drawings sport feathers and doilies; installations feature eggs and hippy art teacher-like fabric swatches—and then transform them so deftly into serious painting that it can take a minute to understand what you’re looking at. Such was my experience, anyway, at Cain’s show at Seiler + Mosseri-Marlio Galerie, where the walls imparted such antic cheer that it took a moment for the works’ gravity to set in.

But set in it did. From afar, the formal ingenuity of huge works like *Double Future Reflection* and *Triangle for R. J. M.* (all works 2009)—each a riotous mix of crafty patterns, gestural brushwork, and hard-edged abstraction—made them resemble large canvases more than the works on paper they were. *Untitled*, with its background of vertical stripes cut with swaths of color, bits of gold foil, and small petal-like forms, seemed a lively cousin of Mary Heilmann’s painting. The comparison has been made before (both Cain and Heilmann attended Berkeley), and Cain has said that she readily identifies with Heilmann’s “speed and attitude.” Nevertheless, her nearest relative might be painter Rebecca Morris, with whom she shares an irreverent approach to a kind of spiritualist art practice, one in which nature’s forms are sometimes addressed in the most unnatural of materials.

Cain’s evocation of nature and organic processes—particularly with form and space—were most apparent in her smaller pieces, some of which were made on antique Swiss sheet music. *Ninon (solo)* featured leaf-like forms of color that evoked Hans Arp’s chance-based collages, while *Future Perfect Tense Two* featured a block of such forms out of which emerged a fan of feathers. The attenuated feathers, like the slim fingers of a handprint, could have been one of those “bad ideas”; instead they acted as both foil and accomplice to the dexterous patterning behind, adding depth, narrative, and a sincerely profane attitude that knocked the seriousness of abstract painting, while simultaneously—and triumphantly—engaging in it.

—Quinn Latimer