

## Mill Valley artist captures prestigious award

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IN THE WORK of Mill Valley artist Sarah Cain, an astonishing sharpness meets explosive creativity and a natural understanding of color and form. Far from hard-edged, her large-scale paintings on paper and site-specific installations vibrate with emotion and life. Sensitive without being sentimental, Cain's work shows abstract, geometric logic played against a rush of fluid, freeform squiggles and lines.

These very qualities caught the eye of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art curators last year, when they visited Cain's studio on their biannual search for local artists to exhibit at the museum. Out of 200 emerging artists who were nominated, only 30 finalists got a studio visit, and just five were chosen to receive the prestigious biennial SECA Art Award (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art). Cain was one of them.

Now, Cain's work is on display in the 2006 SECA Award Exhibition, running through April 22 at SFMOMA. The award - which was established 40 years ago - acknowledges local artists of "exceptional talent and great promise." Cain is in good company with the four other artists who won this year: Kota Ezawa, Amy Franceschini, Mitzi Pederson and Leslie Shows.

"We followed the work of these artists for several years, and Sarah Cain stood out for having a really sophisticated practice," explains Janet Bishop, curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA. "We were compelled by the ways she explores space, color and the relationship between the form of the

work and what she wishes to communicate."

In her airy studio at the Marin Headlands Center for the Arts just a few weeks ago, Cain was busy completing several such pieces for the SECA exhibition. Very large paintings on paper featuring splats and diagonal stripes in rich hues hung on one wall; a pile of black spray-painted leaves languished in one corner, a few of them decorated with colorful stripes; a cross-section of a tree trunk leaned against one wall, painted white with a tiny rainbow curving into the wood grain.

Cain has worked at this studio at the center for the last year while living nearby in Mill Valley. A longtime resident of Oakland and San Francisco, she relishes the peace and more outdoors-oriented lifestyle that living and working in Marin County has afforded her.

"The Headlands is an ideal studio space for me because I can look outside and see a mountain," she says. "Nature is the one thing that puts me in check. The real parallel is that I grew up on a dirt road in upstate New York, so nature shows up a lot in my work."

Cain's signature organic materials and bright color palette will couple with a diffuse emotional element in her pieces at the SECA exhibition. She'll show six works, which include several of her enormous paintings on paper, a few smaller works, and one site-specific piece she'll make in the exhibition space. All of them seem to depict a balance between freedom and rigidity, the biomorphic and geometric, and pure abstraction and narrative. Case in point: these works will include real leaves, images of waves, photos of the artist's hands and blobby, earth-like shapes. They'll also show sharp lines, plenty of negative space and harsh, undiluted colors.

"Everything in life has a polar opposite, and this idea manifests itself in my work," Cain, 28, explains. "It's a push and pull, an openness that ends up looking explosive, and some people think it's naive. It's my personality: in life and my work, I don't think I should ever hesitate from taking a risk."

This ability to embrace the unknown has colored Cain's life experiences, which in turn inform her art. A sampling of her unorthodox history: she dropped out of high school to move to France; she spent a year drawing in silence there because she couldn't speak the language; she moved from place to place making art so that she didn't have to pay rent. She finally settled in the Bay Area to attend San Francisco Art Institute and receive an MFA from the University of California at Berkeley. She has painted furiously for the last three years and shows her work internationally. She is represented by Anthony Meier Fine Art in San Francisco.

The SECA Award exhibition will be Cain's first time showing in a museum and it represents a turning point, a new adventure for her and one for which she says she feels "so thankful."

It may be safe to assume that this is hardly the end of her story. For many past SECA Award recipients, the exhibition and award have served to move their artistic pursuits to the next level.

"It's a great honor to give artists an opportunity to show their work on a greater platform than they've had up to this point in their careers," says curator Bishop.

"The Bay Area is a region where many artists live and so many of them consider this place conducive to their projects. Sarah Cain is like that. She is able to synthesize a lot of influences and work with them adeptly in a way that defines a really individual body of work."

## IF YOU GO

**What:** 2006 SECA Art Award exhibition featuring work by Sarah Cain, Kota Ezawa, Amy Franceschini, Mitzi Pederson and Leslie Shows

**When:** Through April 22

**Where:** San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily except Wednesdays

**Information:** [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org) or call 357-4000

**More:** A free artist talk with the 2006 SECA Art Award Winners will take place noon to 1 p.m. Feb. 6 in SFMOMA's Phyllis Wattis Theater.

Sarah Cain will present a free poetry reading and performance at 1:30 p.m. March 29 in SFMOMA's Koret Visitor Education Center.