

New American Paintings

Spotlight: Sarah Cain Evan J. Garza Issue 97, 2012

How the L.A. artist is expanding the field of contemporary painting one installation at a time

For all the freedom that a blank canvas provides, for all the endless possibilities inherent to the application of paint, and the inestimable number of compositional and chromatic combinations intrinsic to the medium of painting, the stretcher—and, therefore, the painting itself—remains a kind of container. However infinite the creative potential might be, and no matter how vast the expanse of the picture plane, a painting is forever confined by the physical limitations of the surface on which it is created.

For years the paintings and site-specific installations of Sarah Cain have actively worked against limitations until those constraints are opened and expanded so far that they cease to resemble limitations at all. Her works on site respond to the physical environment in which they're installed, from abandoned buildings and studio spaces to museums and kunsthallen, wrapping around columns and cascading down gallery walls onto the floor. Her installations are dynamic collaborations between the artist, her surroundings, and what already exists.

Through the process of reacting with, and against, the sites in which her work is installed, Cain's breakdown of those spaces is often done through linear structures, and her compositions—both two and three-dimensional—are dotted with colorful geometric forms.

Although her work responds to the parameters placed on her—either by the space or the restrictions of what she's allowed to do to that space—her practice is marked by a remarkable sense of freeness. As for materials: anything goes, and the same could almost be said for her works created on site. More than any other defining quality in Cain's work is her attention to space, and each piece, even her "flat" two-dimensional works on paper, reveal a hyperawareness of spatial concerns. The space in question is largely physical—with some installations on site stretching colorful geometric abstractions between multiple rooms, billowing over stairwells, and



spilling across the floor— but it's the emotional space she explores that's the most surprising. It's nearly as tangible as the objects her viewers walk around.

"It's hard to talk about emotions in work intellectually," Cain tells me. "I think a lot of people shy away from it. But it's definitely a driving force behind my work... I work on ten to twenty different pieces at the same time, and each one has it's own emotional starting point. Many times, a piece will start in one emotional space and transform into another one. The work is in part the translation of emotional space."

Growing up in upstate New York, surrounded by expansive fields and pastures, Cain experienced several early revelations of space. She dropped out of public school her sophomore year of high school after she'd determined she wanted to be an artist, and many of her formative years during this time were spent taking long walks by herself.

"I'd be in a field and, I know it sounds odd," Cain says with the makings of a laugh in her voice, "but I could follow the deer paths and see where the deer lived. I could just sit and wait long enough and these creatures would enter from different access points. I try really hard to get back to the country once or twice a year and have this intense connection with the solitude and quietness of nature. There's something about being by yourself and waiting; you access space in this way that's really hard to find in the bustle of the city. Or the fear of the city."

After returning to school and completing her undergrad at the San Francisco Art Institute, Cain bounced around the country nomadically for four years, picking up week-long jobs and making work inside of abandoned buildings. Forced to make work with a short lifespan, she grew to understand discovery and conflict in a high speed manner that would firmly establish her relationship to space.

Now living in Los Angeles, she hasn't abandoned either nature or vast open spaces. When Cain leaves her home in one park she drives through a park to get to her studio in yet another park. Her studio rests at the end of a gravel lot adjacent to several vacant, dusty plots of land. It's a remarkably open and bare little pocket of the city, and a tiny break from L.A.'s strip malls, paved lots, and urban clutter.

Although not intending to stay, while she looked for an abandoned building to prepare an off-site installation for the 2008 California Biennial, curated by Lauri Firstenberg at the Orange County Museum of Art, Cain uncovered the natural and spatial elements of Los Angeles and decided to move. The concept of discovery and the process of delving into the unknown are trademarks of her site-specific practice, and the artist admits even she doesn't know how the final installation will look until it's complete, despite any planning she might do in advance.

There is a deeply romantic—even noble—quality to Cain's intuitive pursuit of the unknown, and her path as a contemporary practitioner reveals the same liberty. From the choice of her materials to the installation work done on site, Cain puts her trust in her environments and situational malleability. She actively expands the field of contemporary painting with the same intuitive fervor that has brought the medium to the place we currently find it—eager to break free from the canvas through physical and compositional abstraction—due in large part to spatial and material undertakings such as hers.

"The site specific installations are all about finding the nuances and flow of the space," she says. "A lot of what you can see and what you can feel [in a space] is the residue of everything that happened before, and I feel I can access that in my work... If you allow yourself the freedom of saying you don't know what you're doing, you allow yourself the freedom of discovering more."