

Sarah Cain Dazzles While Michel Majerus Depresses in Two New Shows

The gewgaw, the bead, and the ugly

By R. C. Baker Wednesday, Mar 12 2014



Galerie Lelong

One notable consequence of the sheer density of the Chelsea art mall: Shows that at first seem to have something in common can quickly divide between the entrancing and the enervating. On 26th Street, [Sarah Cain](#) transmutes [My Little Pony](#) palettes and cheap baubles into a gaggle of exuberantly tough paintings and one bewitching installation. Four blocks south, [Michel Majerus](#) deploys grandiose scale to send viewers on a tedious Where's Waldo–like trek through postwar art history and pop-culture references.

Cain's *The World*(2013) is big enough to invite you inside.

The L.A.-based Cain (b. 1979) adorns her paintings with glitter, beads, chain necklaces, and other gewgaws that punctuate her robustly painted abstract forms. The roughly two-foot-high *bisexual boys are like unicorns* (2013) spews ideas, touched off by that fey title and expanded upon by the rainbow-hued strips fashioned from beaded stitching gamboling across the canvas. A scarlet chandelier crystal hangs in an upper corner, a sparkly pendant that anchors an oscillation between what might be a psychedelic landscape or ecstatic figural gesture, disparate concepts that this pliable composition easily embraces.

At almost five and a half feet tall, *The World* (2013) is big enough to invite you inside, should you care to live in the forced-perspective confines of what could pass for the backdrop of a 1950s cartoon. Skewed rectangles of mostly oranges and pinks interrupted by rich blues and greens are outlined with string and accented with pastel tassels; one, dangling just past the bottom edge of the canvas, deftly fractures the image's fictive volume. The expectant aura of this airy space recalls the warm-hued bodies in de Kooning's early paintings of women seated before cool, window-like rectangles.



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Cain's *New Logic*, 2014

Sarah Cain: 'Burning Bush'

Galerie Lelong

528 West 26th Street

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Like that master, Cain has sharp design skills that quickly overcome any feeling of treacle her high-pitched hues might suggest, and her site-specific installation *hypnic jerk* bristles with that amalgam of chromatic ingenuity, textural finesse, and compositional brinksmanship that has kept painting fresh since the first cave

murals. A hypnic jerk is one of those body twitches that occurs just as a person is falling asleep, and the sinewy networks of stripes, spray-painted lines, splatters, and over-painted objects Cain has arrayed across three walls of the gallery create a shifting, surreal ambience. A series of suspended prisms absorb, bend, and break up the light angling in from the surrounding composition, a remarkably effective, if surpassingly simple, expansion of painting into a 3D realm that pushes against classic figure/ground concepts. Cain wittily emphasizes this sensation with a painting of a checkered pyramid perched above a larger canvas that has been turned to face the wall, its stretcher bars echoing the grid above.

This material diversity coalesces into a web that recalls the interconnected facets of the brain. What part of that organ controls — or misfires to cause — those spasms at the brink of sleep? That Cain's corporeal abstraction conjures such questions even as it envelopes you in astutely sloppy beauty reminds us that painting, older than any language, still probes the uncharted territory between mind and body with more grace and gusto than any other medium.

So why does all the boldly painted square footage by Michel Majerus, marching halfway down a Chelsea block, feel so exasperatingly inert?

For starters, I speculated on Cain's influences, but there was no doubt as to which artists inspired Majerus (who was born in [Luxembourg](#) in 1967 and died in a plane crash in 2002).

In their collaborations, [Andy Warhol](#) and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) diluted each other's strengths — the Pop maestro was at his best mining poignant variations within epic repetition, while the upstart youngster reveled in dense mark-making and energetic characters. The flat corporate logos and slapdash figures on sparse grounds of their joint efforts served neither well. Majerus's silk-screened appropriations from 1999 prove even more sluggish than that duo's original 1980s pastiches, his contribution amounting to dragging a single broad brushstroke down the white blank created by shifting the copied imagery off-center. Majerus's eye for mediocrity also focused on de Kooning's mannered landscapes from the early 1960s, a period of recalibration in the Dutchman's prodigious career. In one instance, Majerus has layered bubble lettering on top of de Kooning-esque strokes in a tone-deaf hodgepodge of hue and texture.

Did Majerus think his elders' missteps were great art, or did he intend, conceptually, to put them on the same level as computer game tableaux? Visuals in video games, as in sitcoms or soap operas, are utilitarian, with any graphic flare subjugated to formulaic narrative. In one untitled, eight-foot-high piece, Majerus positioned the game character Mario in a white corner of an otherwise uninflected field of red enamel, doubling down on the byte-deep flatness of the electronic realm — certainly a challenge to, but no advance upon, de Kooning's insight that oil paint equals flesh. Another work in this style features [Toy Story's Buzz Lightyear](#) and Woody; such quick takes are reminiscent of a [Google](#) image search: You feel a burst of recognition, then it's on to the next window and more snippets of information devoid of any visceral connection. In some works, Majerus torques words into warped objects — "plant explosive device" curls above disjointed words and imagery in one six-and-a-half-foot square canvas. These suspended phrases may have a viewer flashing on logos affixed to soaring skateboards; at one point in his career, Majerus festooned a gargantuan half-pipe with graphics and such phrases as "burned out" and "fuck the intention of the artist." (2000's *if we are dead, so it is*.)

But for all these garish colors and cropped forms, the overall impression from this mini-retrospective is one of slacker lethargy. Which is perhaps the nut of why these bombastic (one piece is 21 feet wide) concoctions come across as so attenuated: The seeming acres of bare or monochrome grounds feel lazy, as if the artist could spare only one idea per canvas.

[Clement Greenberg](#) famously declared, "All profoundly original art looks ugly at first."

The flipside might be formulated thusly: A breezy cultural swipe deployed at grand scale might seem hot stuff at first glance. But a note to investors — it becomes ugly at last.