

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

May 6th, 2008

Marie Sivak - Barbara Hatfield

by Becky Brown

Marie Sivak *Ephemera A.I.R.* Gallery April 1 – April 26, 2008

Barbara Hatfield *Leave a Little Emptiness A.I.R.* Gallery April 1 – April 26, 2008

The most striking work in Barbara Hatfield's exhibition *Leave a Little Emptiness* is "2 pieces," a thin wooden plank that nearly blends into the wall. It is 26 inches long and two inches wide, covered in a rough coat of white paint, and sliced down the middle at a slight angle. Running over a penciled line (and missing it slightly), the resulting dark crack becomes a streak of negative space that activates the pieces around it, holding them, along with the viewer, in its spell. The bare bones of a Barnett Newman (minus the canvas, the color and most of the surface area), it is hung at eye level like a painting, but has the ghostly aura of a misplaced piece of driftwood. It draws tension from its ambiguous state between the handcrafted and the naturally-occurring—without aesthetic flourish or apparent utility, its presence remains mysterious.

It is from this shadowy zone between the organic and the inorganic that Hatfield's work draws its power. Her most prevalent motif is the grid fragment: square-ish shapes piled, attached or drifting apart—bits of Agnes Martin wavering in the breeze or floating on the surface of water.



Marie Sivak, "Floating Remnants," (2007), carved

These are spider webs, snake scales and skin pores on the one hand; train windows and urban facades on the other. In Hatfield's vocabulary, a twig and a stationery supply (rows of vinyl punch-hole reinforcements) become equal mark-makers—each staking its ground in the emptiness.

alabaster, marble, selenite, video, string, mdf, pencil, wax, stainless steel, brass.

Marie Sivak's exhibition *Ephemera*, occupying A.I.R.'s middle room, also uses diverse material. While Hatfield shifts between two- and three-dimensional media from piece to piece, Sivak incorporates sculpture, drawing and video into single works. Using a more representational image pool, she presents domestic objects (a book, a ball of yarn, a paper bag) in unlikely materials, scales and settings. "Floating Remnants" (2007) combines actual found objects with intricate stone-carved renderings—a meeting of the real and the imaginary. The addition of video pushes Surrealism into the 21st century: as a projected image, a tiny, scurrying fly is transparent, immaterial—exposing and emphasizing the *material* (alabaster, and the image of an envelope carved into it) beneath. The meaning of these symbols is hazy, but the juxtaposition of material (and lack thereof) offers a direct sensory paradox, a collision of distinct time periods and physical properties.

The press release states that Sivak's works are intended to act as a "slim interface between the material world and the intangible world of memory." They succeed in presenting physical realities and impossibilities simultaneously, and there are moments of poetry: the double ellipse formed by the hanging yarn (reminiscent of Jasper Johns' *Catenary* series); the fly moving endlessly in a tiny space and getting nowhere; the way drawing bleeds over the wooden edge, a thick white line splitting into delicate pencil strokes. But combined, these pieces become a jumble: they swing in all directions and fail to form a cohesive whole. Sivak may claim a distaste for cohesive wholes—she clearly chooses the amalgam-of-fragments approach over linear storytelling—but there must be continuity of some kind (formal, material, narrative) for the work to carry meaning. Joseph Cornell, for example, employs the glass box as unifying visual framework (and literal frame) for his highly nonlinear assemblages.

The interdisciplinary is highly regarded in today's art world, and both Hatfield and Sivak fit into the trend. Young artists, when asked what type of work they do, often list a number of media as elements of a "total practice." Master of Fine Arts programs assure applicants that whether they enter the department of painting, sculpture or photography, they will not be confined to that medium during graduate study. As a result, we often see a range of materials and processes in a single body of work. But an interdisciplinary practice should not be valued for its own sake—it should feel as refined, inevitable, *singular* as a photograph or a painting (take, for example, a sprawling John Bock installation: sculpture, video and performance culminating in an unmistakable flash of energy). Barbara Hatfield and Marie Sivak have a lot of ideas, and they each make a diverse set of marks to express them. But in both cases, the breadth of media in a small, one-room exhibition seems to dilute meaning instead of sharpening it. Hatfield produces paintings, drawings, prints, collages and sculpture; Sivak combines many of these, plus video, in single works. To communicate more clearly, each might do better to focus her practice

into one or two disciplines, choosing a single theme or motif and developing it in a concentrated effort. Each has a number of qualified candidates to choose from—elements that deserve to be explored further, even given center stage. They face a potent challenge: to hone their practices without curbing the ambition and experimentation that drives their work.

CONTRIBUTOR

Becky Brown

Becky Brown is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

Not A Painting

by *Kate Liebman*

JUL-AUG 2015 | ARTSEEN

It's a group of work united by something outside the group: painting. But we see and approach, each of the pieces in "Not A Painting" as if that's what they are, because that's what some of them look like. Everything is wall hung, and though most of the work might be classified as sculpture, the exhibition ultimately undermines such categorizing.



LYNDA BENGLIS

by *David Rhodes*

OCT 2016 | ARTSEEN

Three contrasting types of work comprise Lynda Benglis' current exhibition at Cheim & Read. Standing alone in the gallery's first room is a towering cast aluminum piece: *The Fall Caught* (2016), a vaguely anthropomorphic form leaning against a wall, large enough to stand beneath.

INCONVERSATION



LARRY BELL with Alex Bacon

MAR 2016 | ART

Alex Bacon visited Larry Bell in his Venice Beach studio to reflect on the artist's long and influential career, which is currently being celebrated in an exhibition of work from the 1960s at Hauser & Wirth's uptown space at 32 East 69th Street.

