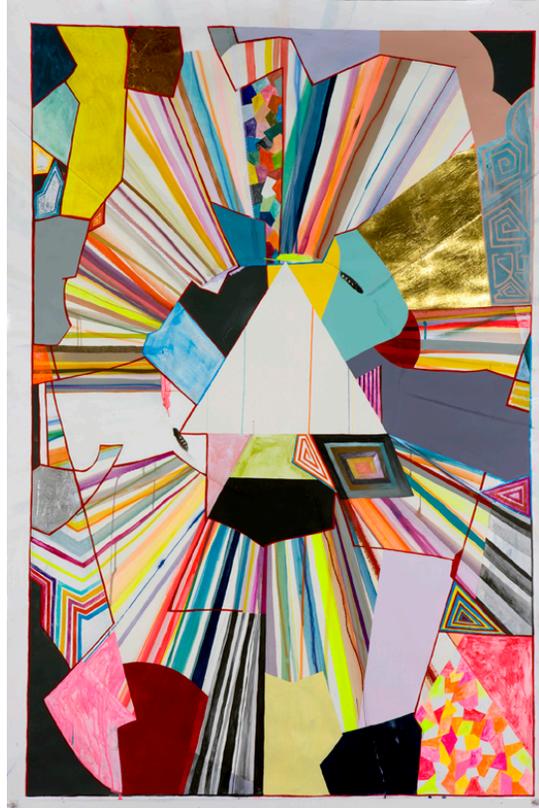


New American Paintings

Q&A: A Conversation with Sarah Cain
Evan J. Garza
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The work of **Sarah Cain** has as much to do with her surroundings as it does with the materials she uses to create it. As the contemporary practice of painting continues to expand exponentially, with many artists becoming less concerned with the physical medium of paint itself, Cain's practice—a combination of control, happenstance, and environmental information—is made unique through its reliance on space and the structural conditions of the locations in which her work is exhibited.

Featured in edition #73 of *New American Paintings* and based in Los Angeles, Cain produces chromatically explosive works on paper and highly dimensional site-specific installations of painted objects, each featuring colorful geometric abstractions. I caught up last week with the New York native and L.A.-based artist to discuss her smart, sculptural work and talk Albers. —*Evan J. Garza*



EJG: It's no stretch to say that your work is quite sculptural, not only in the three-dimensional sense of some of your larger pieces, or even in installations, but also in the way your compositions are constructed in works on paper. Tell me about the sculptural quality of your work.

The work is painting via sculptural ideas. It is all about the multiple forms of space: physical, psychic and emotional. I'm interested in challenging the comfort zones within what painting can be.

EJG: Your work, especially your recent work, is often activated in a three-dimensional way when installed in a gallery, with works spilling over on the ground and site-specific marks moving up walls. It's really remarkable, in fact, and the viewer really gets a sense of dimension. Tell me about how you approach dimension in your work.

The dimensions within the works on site usually reference or deliberately work against the dimensions of the environment. Sometimes there are divisions within the dimensions—the overall composition might reference the gallery dimensions while the breakdown within a work might originate from the materials at hand. An example of this layering can be found with some of the recent deconstructed canvas works on site. They reference both the environment they're coming out of and the given logic of the stretcher bars. The works on paper change from work to

work. Some of the works on music sheets originate from the pre-existing notations on the paper while other times, say on a blank piece of paper, the dimensions might reference an imagined physical space.

EJG: You have a very obvious penchant for geometric shapes, and your attention to form seems both organic and man-made. What is it about geometric forms that you're drawn to and what do they accomplish for your work?

As a kid, math was my favorite subject, I think this has to do with the mental state of mathematics being akin to abstraction. There is that blurry fleeting zone when figuring out a mathematical equation where you know you're getting to the answer, but if you stop to break it down bit-by-bit you might lose everything.

The making and viewing of my work has a similar feeling that pushes you to the conclusion, more from an overall feeling than a realized sentence. I also think the interest in geometry is tied to nature. I grew up in the country and spent many of my formative years looking at the natural order of things. Within the work, the geometric references create an assumed structure. However, in many cases when the viewer looks long enough, the structure starts to unfold, at times it turns in on itself and the assumed order is disturbed.

EJG: The attention to three and four sided forms extends, at times, into pattern. What is about the accumulation of shapes/pattern that you enjoy?

Patterns also relate to nature so that might be key. I started frequently using patterns when I moved into a studio in the fabric district in downtown Los Angeles. I began using found fabrics as compositional starting points. The attraction was about starting with a set pattern and then breaking it down to include the hand, which in turn introduces the imperfection. I was also conceptually working from bad ideas as starting points around the same time. I think using pattern successfully in painting is very difficult to do, so in a way I was trying to work through that, to own the bad idea. Lastly, patterns can alter space in a very unique way, so again space is part of the equation.

EJG: Are you a Josef Albers fan?

I'm an Anni Albers fan. I am also fond of her peer Gunta Stolz. I understand why you'd ask about Josef Albers. Color is very important to me too, though I've never been very analytical about it—it's innate.

EJG: You use several different media to create your work, from gold leaf, gouache, and spray paint to masonite and thread. How do you choose/acquire these materials, and how do work with them in the studio?

I'm very open to working with whatever materials come my way. My studio practice is extremely experimental and I'm constantly trying to find new solutions. My environment dictates a lot of my materials too. Each time I move studios I acquire a new media. This is also true for the individual locations of the works on site. I work on many pieces at the same time and try to not be too attached to their outcome. I believe you have to risk the piece in order to keep ascending with the work. Even though it's not really true, I like to take the stance that I don't know what I'm doing with my materials—this way the end result can have more options.

EJG: Was that a mobile in your solo show at CTRL Gallery in Houston?

That piece is called *Making it rain*. It's a hanging group of double sided painted dollars. It is a talisman. That work is a great example of how materials come into my practice. I was walking to the studio one day and found a dollar bill folded up into a triangular ring. I picked it up, unfolded it and realized for the first time that the paper used for money would be a good painting surface. I repeated the original fold on all the additional dollars. Many of the compositions come from the fold as well as from leaving some of the original eyes and pyramids from the dollar design. During the same time I was making those I began working on an upcoming installation in a former Masonic lodge, so the Masonic imagery on the dollar was of particular interest.

EJG: Scale also seems to be an important trait in your work, with some pieces being intimately scaled and others are quite large. Tell me about how you approach scale in your work.
Each piece has its specific needs so I'm unable to give a basic rule on how I use scale. Although, I've noticed that many of the larger works tend to reference the outside world as they come from a bodily approach, while more often the smaller ones reflect an interior mental space.

EJG: For all the control that exists in many of your hard-lined forms, your work also often features drips and organic or accidental compositional elements. How much control do you allow yourself when making your work, say when making a site-specific piece or a work on paper? Does it differ with each?

With all my work I strive for the delicate line between control and abandon. In a finished work, all the marks are completely considered. Ten years ago I started making works on site because I wasn't ready to deal with everything that went along with making objects. In a lot of ways, the works on site began out of an attempt to eliminate control. By embracing the ephemeral, I had to think and act in the present tense, I had to learn to embrace the inevitable that things will not be what you expect. All the work is based largely on trust and a heightened sense of awareness. The practice attempts to carry with it the urgency of the present tense as well as to *uncontrol* control or vice versa.

EJG: What are you working on now and where do you go from here?

I'm working everyday on a bunch of things—a series of large deconstructed canvases, works on paper, [and] doing as much planning as possible for an exciting year of works on site. The first work on site will open March 2011 at Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum. After that I'm doing a 5,000 sq ft. installation in a former Masonic Temple in Marfa, TX with LAND, the Los Angeles Nomadic Division, opening in Oct 2011. Those two shows, along with the current one I have up at Sara Meltzer Gallery / Projects in New York, will come together in a book project. I will also be part of the show *Two Schools of Cool*, curated by Sarah Bancroft at the Orange County Museum of Art in Oct 2011, [which] pairs historic Californian artists with contemporary ones, so I've been collaborating with my friend George Herms in preparation for that.

Sarah Cain was featured in edition #73 of New American Paintings. Images courtesy the artist Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.