

MOMUS

“She Comes in Colors”: A Portrait of Painter Sarah Cain

BY [ANDREW BERARDINI](#) • [FEATURES](#) • MAY 10, 2017



Sarah Cain, "Leave Pile," 2007 (detail)

This is the first entry in a new series titled “Portraits,” by *Momus* contributing editor Andrew Berardini. The project is an experiment: Berardini sits with various “figures around art” and casts them – as an artist would sketch – in shades of language befitting their singular selves.

It is a series of meditations by the author on friends and strangers: many of whom are dear to him. He positions himself not as objective critic but something akin to Baudelaire’s “partial, passionate, political.”

Portraits are not profiles, not biographies; they locate a moment, or a series of moments, which elucidate something evanescent in mid-flight. Meeting subjects at their métiers, among their friends, or alone in their homes; each offers a different kind of reflection.

Some are grand, some are modest, some are close. Below, this first portrait of painter Sarah Cain finds her deeply ensconced in feral colors and scheming cats over an afternoon at her studio. The scene rings with an intimacy that would be deadened by flat description.

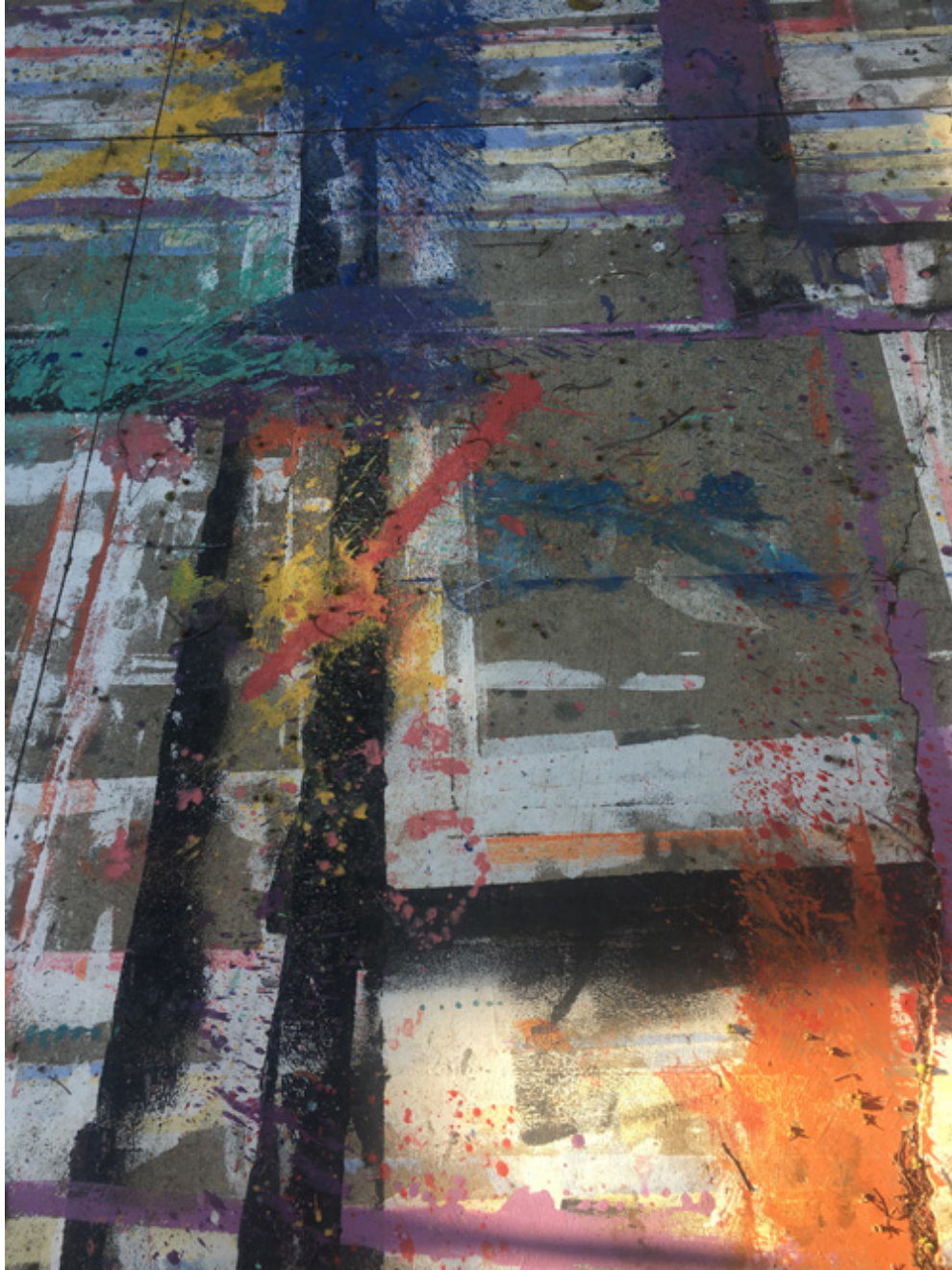
With projects like this one, *Momus* hopes to mine criticism's potential for new forms, beyond the traditional essay or review. We'd like to explore the possibility that the work of criticism inheres not only in the explicit content of an argument, but also in the rush of vernacular.

Admittedly, this kind of formal experiment is daunting for an editor – especially one concerned foremost with the integrity of criticism. At times the reader might question our objectivity, our critical remove. But these ideals have always been chimeric. Language was ever criticism's screen and medium. Here it simply makes its case more boldly.

As we support these kinds of ventures, we'll continue to ask, anew: can criticism work this way?

To us, the question is worth its weight in risk. We hope you'll agree, and enjoy.

– Casey Beal, Senior Editor, *Momus*



Sarah Cain's driveway.

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With scarred ears and bright eyes, a ragged pounce of cats haunt and scheme, dart and slink with battered elegance around the sacks of uprooted succulents and stacks of chopped cactuses awaiting wet soil on the paint splattered driveway. The concrete wears this drip and spray like a flamboyant party dress, a technicolor dreamcoat, holy robes for a thousand gods and none at all. This accidental mural looks as free and intentional as the

painter who made it. Behind the glass garage door just beyond, Sarah Cain stalks a studio.

“Hey mister, do you want some iced tea?”

Sarah crouches on the ground in a grape sweatshirt and battered, splattered blue jeans, her thick brown hair pulled back, eyes narrowed under a knit brow. She brushes a long ray of darkest navy blue, beaming from a crystal hanging from the canvas. Red and pink spraypaint squiggles and blushes under all this beams of exquisite radiance. Daisy yellow and velvety grays. Cyan and burnt orange.

Whilst Sarah paints, I write this atop a half-painted sofa, an errant renegade from a larger sectional. Abandoned from an artwork, it stays an artwork, functional and worn, faded yellow flowers coated in broad swathes of softest pink. We pass words between keystrokes and brushstrokes.

Her paintings begin simply, a point of pure color in space. Many hang around us half-done, half-dressed. Purple braids shimmy in the breeze, undone bras wet with color dangle just so. Often her canvas is canvas, woven, stretched and primed by Sarah, her hands learning as she pulls and staples their skins, gessos their faces, fingers their futures. But sometimes her canvas winks from walls and floors, rooms and buildings. One mural taunts me on Santa Monica from the side of a strip mall, I want to tap her shoulder but it's only a painting and so I keep driving west past the movie studios and into an embering sunset.

Here are only just a few unpainted canvases hanging around the studio, leaning like hustlers near La Brea at dusk, their white shirts waiting for the work of night's stains. When Sarah begins, the blank white shatters into a multitude of hues as points stretch into lines, lines into shapes. Red circles and blue triangles, green diamonds and yellow squares, harlequin polygons whose names are so infinite that they are merely inventories of angles. Magentas and violets hang and flap, they stretch tightly and crawl through space like the crooked fingers of a birch branch, like kudzu. Pure light beams brightly and then settles down into pure gold. A strip of ecru layers above salmon above amaranth, carved out strata in geologic time. Shapes bulge and split, reach outward and are woven and chained, spilling and spraying, the skin ripped away, like an old shroud slipping to reveal the spirit beneath. Rich auburns and airy limes trip and fall in slippery wrestling matches ending in wet skin, wild laughter. A ray of silver strays and panthers to a point. Sometimes colors make mistakes too. Like us, they feel if they tear away their skin, emotion will be revealed in its purity. But it is the act and its violence that reveals suffering, not the naked bones beneath.

There is a courage to these colors. One can easily see that they would gladly go beyond, past glib primaries and cowardly hues, past dull shades and sad dyes. They outstrip the easily fed and idly found. They let go of control with the drunken grace of a prima ballerina alone in a midnight wood, no maestra, no audience, but the purest precision of unfettered movement along with the the crush of pine needles, the call of nighthawks, and the moon.

Without looking up, Sarah tells me the latest on her feline brood, the only celebrities whose lives I know better than any tabloid.

“I dewormed both of the gray ones, but they’re too wild to bring into the vet. I’m not supposed to tell anyone, but I managed to get the meds without bringing them in. It’s so gross to wake up with worms everywhere. This new spray is helping with their spraying. I just love them so much.”

How many do you have these days?

“Nine. Roxy, Lou, Graybeau, Grayghost, Whitemomcat, Tommy, Cowcat, Lion, Galaxy. I call Whitemamacat Mamacita too. She’s such a tough bitch.”

Sarah’s feral beloveds, even with a home they remain untamed. Like her colors.



Sarah Cain's poster for "Feral" at Cardi Black Box, Milan, 2013.

They are free, even though freedom has its costs, any child can tell you. A raunchy Italian orange, a mossy verdigris the color of woods witches' potions, a purple stain like a fresh bruise on the young skin of tough and a tender street kid, the glitter swirling over it like the sparkle of guardian fairies, a blunt mercurial red softened with blessed unguents and essential oils, a green like a dying dollar bill unrolling into music and talisman. Though these colors suffer no fools, their love is deep and fierce, taking in stray shades like mad poets and grizzled jokers with a devotion unbreakable as Sarah.

"I am a palm tree

you think I will

break in the wind

and so do I

but I won't"

she wrote once, a poem in a painting.

A prayer I don't soon forget.

Sarah's colors come together in colonies the opposite of camouflage. Old gold and rust, saffrons and indigos enfold and cover one another like the limbs of lovers in a joyful orgy. Teals poke and jab fuchsias, oranges overrun and undermine, turquoises lend support and succor. The colors nurture, they obliterate. They assemble in perfect harmony like soft sounds in a mossy forest. They grid into games for unknown sports and battles. Once wounded, they snap and billow in the wind.

"I had this British collector over this morning, he had the best pink flamingo shirt on, when I said I'd like to make a painting out of it he said he'd send it to me when he's done with it. I hope that's just not British wit."

I cannot see the color except as a tropical feather against sunburnt skin. Candied at the tips softened by white at the shaft.

"Beauty of a shirt."

The colors come apart. Ebonies shudder and spit, greens writhe with unkempt electricity. Colors in tension shudder and burst, divide to suffer unknown agonies, each singly, glowing alone, broken from the prism but now unified, inseparable. A single brilliant shard of chroma, a monochrome rainbow, a solitary ray, bare as a ghost, shining on with ever obstinate clarity.

Once again as ever free, I wear this tattoo, along with the radiant points of a starburst Sarah once painted on my chest. Faded at the edge, but otherwise indelible.

Spring breezes through the studio, the light bends towards dusk. Sarah's still bent over her painting, a supple wrist brushing intently. Graybeau approaches slowly, suspiciously examining me with two different colored eyes, diamond slits peering through spheres of swirling mist gray and serpentine green. I set out my hand, but he jolts, disappearing into a thicket just beyond the open garage door.

With a care she reserves for old tomcats, Sarah looks up at me and laughs.