



Fresh Paint

Sarah Cain's joyful, exuberant canvases, currently supplanting a handful of 20th-century masters at the National Gallery of Art, are the right tonic for a time of transition. **Dodie Kazanjian** reports.

Sarah Cain, a 41-year-old Los Angeles-based artist whose wildly colorful paintings dominate huge spaces, is about to take over the National Gallery of Art's soaring East Building Atrium. One of the most heavily visited spaces in the nation's capital, the building has been closed for several months due to the pandemic but also to allow for a major renovation. The great hanging Calder was removed; the sculptures by Richard Serra, Isamu Noguchi, and Max Ernst stayed put but were enclosed in protective boxes the size of mobile homes. "It's going to be so deadly in there," Molly Donovan, the NGA's contemporary-art curator, remembers thinking when the process began. "No art, just gray construction walls. What can we do?" Her solution: Get artists to transform the atrium while the work goes on. "I was looking for color, and Sarah provides that like nobody else—joyful, exuberant, remarkable paintings."

From the start of her 15-plus-year career, Cain tells me on Skype, "people always give me the weird spots that they don't know what to do with." I'm on the East Coast, and she's in her Los Angeles studio, surrounded by eight-by-seven-foot canvases that will

come together as one painting on a very large, temporary construction wall. "I was really excited about the project. I thought, Okay, I'll go there and make a massive work on-site." Part of the fun would be supplanting the "old dudes," the male 20th-century masters who have always occupied the atrium, and this thought contributed to the show's title: "My favorite season is the fall of the patriarchy."

But then the pandemic hit. The NGA had planned to remain open during the renovation, but it was forced to shut in March of last year. As of this writing, it intends to reopen sometime this spring. Meanwhile, the actual creation of the installation faced new hurdles: Unable to travel, Cain had to figure out how to work from a distance and still keep the spontaneity of her intuitive improvisation. "One of my biggest goals is to make active, exciting, breathable work," she says. "I've made more than 50 works on-site, and I love the ephemerality" >112

BRIGHT LINE

RIGHT: Cain, photographed at her color-and-light-soaked studio in Garvanza, Los Angeles.
 ABOVE: A detail of the working composite for Cain's National Gallery installation.



ABOVE LEFT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. STUDIO: PHILIP CHEUNG



and the present tense and the energy this can capture.” The imagery (a giant purple-violet “X,” hot-pink and multicolored geometric abstractions, etc.) was eventually applied to the protective boxes by National Gallery design staff, who worked from Cain’s detailed drawings and were overseen by FaceTime guidance. “I’m actually excited to be doing it this way,” she says. “It’s been a big learning curve, but I’ve come to realize that I don’t have to be there. I can do this until I’m 90.”

Cain lives in the Garvanza neighborhood of L.A., near Pasadena, and her studio is on the property, with a view of orange, lemon, and apricot trees. In this worst of all possible times, she is busier than ever. She gets up early to feed her rescue cats and works nonstop until it’s time to feed the cats again and go to bed. “I started doing cat rescue so I’d stop dating assholes,” she says with a big laugh. “I have a really sweet boyfriend”—a marine biologist, whom she refers to as “my cutie”—“and a lot of cats. I trap them, have them fixed at the vet, and then release them if they have a food source. I’ve flown quite a few cats to the art world in New York.” Cain, who keeps in shape with strenuous hill hiking and online Pilates, is planting an ambitious garden in her backyard and has organized her pandemic social life around FaceTime teas with friends.

As of this writing, her exhibition “In Nature” is set to open in February at the Momentary, the new contemporary art satellite of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, and her “Enter the Center” show is scheduled for July at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. She recently joined Broadway, a new gallery in downtown Manhattan, where she’ll have a solo show in September. “I’m insanely overscheduled,” she tells me. Confident and full of kick-ass feminism, she manages somehow to combine femininity with her own brand of swagger. “There’s always been tough ladies around me,” she says. “My mom and my grandmother—and my dad’s a feminist, too. They instilled this ‘You can do it’ attitude.”

“She’s tough and she’s bold and she’s not shy,” says Donovan. “But her work embraces the feminine. That’s why I love it. It’s fierce.”

Cain left home in Kinderhook, New York, when she was 15, to go to Paris. She remembers hearing an announcement over the loudspeaker at her “horrible” public

high school asking for foreign-exchange participants. She immediately volunteered. “I can’t believe my parents let me go, but I don’t know if they had a choice,” she says. “I was pretty hard to tame.” Her mother was a public school teacher; her father worked for the state health industry. Cain had just dropped her French classes in order to take more art classes, and when she got to France, she was “mute for months.” That year, she



COLOR THEORY

“They have the energy of the person,” the artist says of her work. Here, Cain’s *Self Portrait*, 2020.

says, was “really brutal, before cell phones and the internet.” But a couple of years later, she was back in France on a full scholarship to the Parsons School of Design’s Paris campus. Next stop was the San Francisco Art Institute, for her B.F.A.

Cain began showing work when she was getting her M.F.A. at Berkeley. The poet Bill Berkson, one of her teachers, saw her wall drawings in a San Francisco artists’ space, and she remembers him telling her, “No one’s going to pay attention to your work if you just do these little quiet lines in a fuck-it manner.” It took her a decade “to get loud enough,” she says, but by 2007 when she moved to L.A., she had found her no-holds-barred approach. “I think of my work as painting moving into sculpture,” she tells me. “I’m very adamant that my paintings are not murals. They’re site-specific paintings.” Her work is abstract but neither quiet nor formal. Paint slides off the canvas and onto

the wall and the floor. Geometric shapes collide with loopy undulations of riotous color. The canvas can get peeled back to reveal the stretchers and the underside of the canvas, which she also paints. Beads, hula hoops, and other found objects enliven the playful, often humorous, surfaces. Not surprisingly, the artists she admires include Agnes Martin, Hilma af Klint, Isa Genzken, Mary Heilmann, Judy Pfaff, Amy Sillman,

Rachel Harrison—and one guy, Richard Tuttle. “The way I paint is totally intuitive,” she says. “I don’t plan; I don’t make sketches. I sort of see it right before it’s going to happen, and I have to stay in a state where I’m open to seeing it.”

The Hammer Museum curator Ali Subotnick, who put Cain in her 2019 Frieze Los Angeles show, tells me, “Sarah’s compositions may be abstract, but they cross over into some other genre because they seem animated and constantly in motion. She makes a space for viewers to move around and inside her work.” For Frieze Los Angeles, which was held on the back lot of Paramount Studios, Cain transformed a classic brownstone film set into a Cain wonderland, painting on every available surface. Later that year, her first

permanent public work was unveiled—a 150-foot-long series of 37 stained-glass windows (using more than 270 colors) at the new AirTrain station at San Francisco International Airport.

Cain’s unique brand of abstraction has always been highly personal, and it makes room for portraits. “They have the energy of the person,” she explains. In her depiction of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the justice’s white lace collar becomes a string of pearls above a fan of vibrant colors; her Kamala Harris is the veep’s first name spelled out in cadmium red with hearts standing in for the three A’s. It’s hard to think of an abstract artist whose work feels so intimate. “I look at a person and see colors,” she tells me. “That’s how the portraits work. There’s a translation that is intuitive and fast.”

“I really believe in living fully and entering into something even though it’s a risk,” Cain says. Her parents “still don’t understand what I do, but I think they’ve accepted that there’s not going to be grandkids. I’m one of those painters who needs to paint every day. Life would be miserable if I wasn’t. I know my reason on Earth is to make paintings.” □