Love Machines

A Survey of Paintings, Prints and Drawings
by Sabina Ott, 1991-1999

August 31 – October 1, 1999

Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College
The following interview with artist Sabina Ott was conducted over several days by Clough-Hanson Gallery Director Marina Pacini in March 1999.

Marina Pacini: How would you describe your work?

Sabina Ott: I see my work, in addition to being discrete paintings and installations, as an accumulation of markings and traces that describe movement—physical movement, psychological movement and cultural movement. It is a kind of document of reciprocity between myself and the world. My paintings are a visualization of the play between signs, materiality and language.

MP: How did you get to this point?

SO: Well, I had always worked with images as signs. I studied art in the late seventies when the study of semiotics and deconstructive methodology was a means to understanding art, history and culture. Feminism and conceptualism were the dominant art movements, and I struggled to reconcile those issues with my love of painting and art history.

The example of medieval art, which was a blending of narrative, abstract and philosophical strategies, also touched me. What fascinated me was the way space is collapsed and perspective becomes fluid, without a fixed point, or how representations of objects shift scale depending on the significance of the image. I felt a direct correlation between the way I experienced the world and this history, a kind of postmodern moment.

MP: Do you feel that your art attempts to describe this recognition of unnameable things?

SO: Yes, through using multiplicities, contradictions and of course, accidents. For example, in my paintings, I’ll reference landscape genres, but disrupt the construction of perspective by inserting an image or changing the point of view from frontal to aerial. Maybe then I’ll displace that figure-ground relationship by overlaying text, and perhaps, in a different scale, I’ll invert another landscape reference. Or possibly make something extremely textual that within formal logic should be flat, alternating from smooth spaces to striated. It is important that my work is both vulgar and refined, like a lewd intellectual. I shift terms constantly between the literal and the abstract. The same thing happens in my paper pieces and installations.

So hopefully there is a constant movement between all these representations and sensations, and hopefully that movement suspends the quick settling into already understood terrain. I guess the point is to heighten awareness of relationships and how they make and change form, how they make and change us.

MP: Can you talk about the influence of Gertrude Stein’s writing on your work?
so: Because her work is literary, not visual, I have enough distance to see her methodology clearly. That's why literature and theory in general are such useful sources. Stein used shifts in syntax to reshuffle relationships—our relationship to language and our relationship to the world. Her writing reveals the representational nature of naming by repeating and shifting the configuration of carefully chosen words, until the "name" becomes one element among others whose meaning changes as the context changes. A word, in her hands, loses its prescribed meaning and opens itself up to be experienced differently. What is perhaps so important about Stein is that she focused so much on the exterior and the materiality of words. She created a kind of ever-present present, which gives room for another mode of experience. The image of Rose, the rose, is also present as a metaphorical structure in Dante's Divine Comedy, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, and some of Virginia Woolf's novels. Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland is another great source. The image of Rose, the rose, becomes difficult to tell what surface is necessarily predetermined. The paintings are made of oil paint melted into sculpture wax. In my current work, I begin by spray-painting overlays of horizontal and vertical stripes or stencils of letters or flower shapes. Then I pour large surfaces of wax and begin to carve roses, letters, stripes or hand-drawn maps. I build a kind of topographical "space," adding and subtracting. It becomes difficult to tell what surface is where within the space of the painting. The surfaces have a variety of textures: some areas are smooth and some are built out four or five inches from the panel. One image or technique is always in relation to its opposite. All the images and methods are repeated within each painting and within all the paintings. The painting is finished when a clear set of relationships can be perceived.

Currently, I am working with text (the letters rose) and landscape structures in addition to contour line drawings of roses, drips, spills, dots and grids. I am fascinated with the idea of shifting horizon lines and differing points of view. Sometimes the space defines itself from above and sometimes from below, or is skewed sideways. I want my paintings to be...
very physical, very material. I want people to desire to touch them or be reminded of food, and then to be pulled back and forth between desire and repulsion, a kind of love machine.

MP: Given your interest in multiplicity and sign systems, do you draw inspiration from outside the fine arts?

SO: I have been looking at rave posters, computer-generated graphics and a lot of Japanese animation films—they are amazing mythic stories with lots of form shifting going on. Working with Photoshop, I have been able to develop sketches for my work. I also videotape real phenomena quite a bit—events that somehow suggest movement or flow. The resulting videotapes are used as source material for paintings, as well as in my installations. I watch lots of movies. Lots. The patterning, the figure-ground relationships and typology of fashion magazines are really interesting.

Tiepolo paintings where the clouds become the ground for the figures and they all float. Xena. Courbet seascapes. Tibetan Buddhist painting. East Indian miniatures. Teletubbies.

MP: With such a wide range of sources, can you briefly summarize your approach to making art?

SO: As Gertrude Stein once said, "Whatever you can play with is yours."

Red not to point to green but to point again 48" x 60", 1997
oil & encaustic on panel
Collection of Kenneth and Nancy Kranzberg
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2000  Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia

1999  McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA, “Hypersalon”


1997  Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, “Women’s Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting”


Center for Fine Arts, Miami, FL, “Abstraction”

1994  3 Day Weekend, Los Angeles, CA, “Dave’s Not Here”


1992  Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, “Breakdown”

1991  Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, “42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting”

Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL, “American Art Today: New Directions”

1987  Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, “Avant-Garde in the Eighties”

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., New York, NY
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Norton Family Foundation, Santa Monica, CA
Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO