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"Love Machines: A Survey of Paintings, Prints and Drawings by Sabina Ott, 1991-1999" Exhibition Brochure

Item Type	Other
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Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Art Department, Rhodes College
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Download date	2025-05-15 21:45:14
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/23665



Love Machines

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

August 31 – October 1, 1999

Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College



...pleasure where there is a passage. . .
48" x 60", 1998
oil & encaustic on panel

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: You mentioned art movements of the 1970s. Are there other postwar artists or movements who shaped your practice?

subrosa #10
84" x 72", 1992
oil & encaustic on panel



SO: Frank Stella's paintings were riveting; I especially loved the Protractor series. The work of Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis is very important; it was the first work I saw that gave me a glimpse of a space in between things and of the possibility of hybrid forms. It was full of contradictions: abstract and concrete, decorative and structural, inside and outside, painting and sculpture.

I love being baffled by things that can't easily be categorized and look for artworks that hover between categories but are very physical, very real. Femaleness is connected to this quality for me. Just trying to define the term is frustrating and exciting. I can't pin it down, it is indefinable. What we already know can be named, but I am interested in what is unnameable and beautiful.

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 textural 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?



...this is never nearby...
30" x 22", 1997
monoprint

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 repressive 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 on the materiality of words. She created a kind of ever-present present, which gives freedom to the imagination. She destroyed hierarchies of value, giving all kinds of objects and actions—cake, grammar, geography, flowers, people and war—equal importance. One can see her influence on many artists, particularly Andy Warhol. However, there is an openheartedness to Stein's love of the world that was not implicit in the practice of the pop artists of the sixties. Her explo-

ration of difference makes room for similarities. Her otherness—as a woman, a lesbian, a Jew, an American—gives her another perspective from which she can say to us, "Act as if there is no use in a center," and then make herself and her work a center.

MP: Is there a specific text that is most meaningful to you?

SO: Well, she reveals her optimism in her children's story, "The World Is Round," which describes the journey into autonomy and self-determination of a little girl named Rose.¹ She takes a blue chair, goes up a mountain, and then stands on the chair and carves "Rose is a Rose is a Rose" around a tree. Rose finds herself through Eros. I use this loosely as the metanarrative of my work. The titles of the new paintings are phrases from Stein's prose.

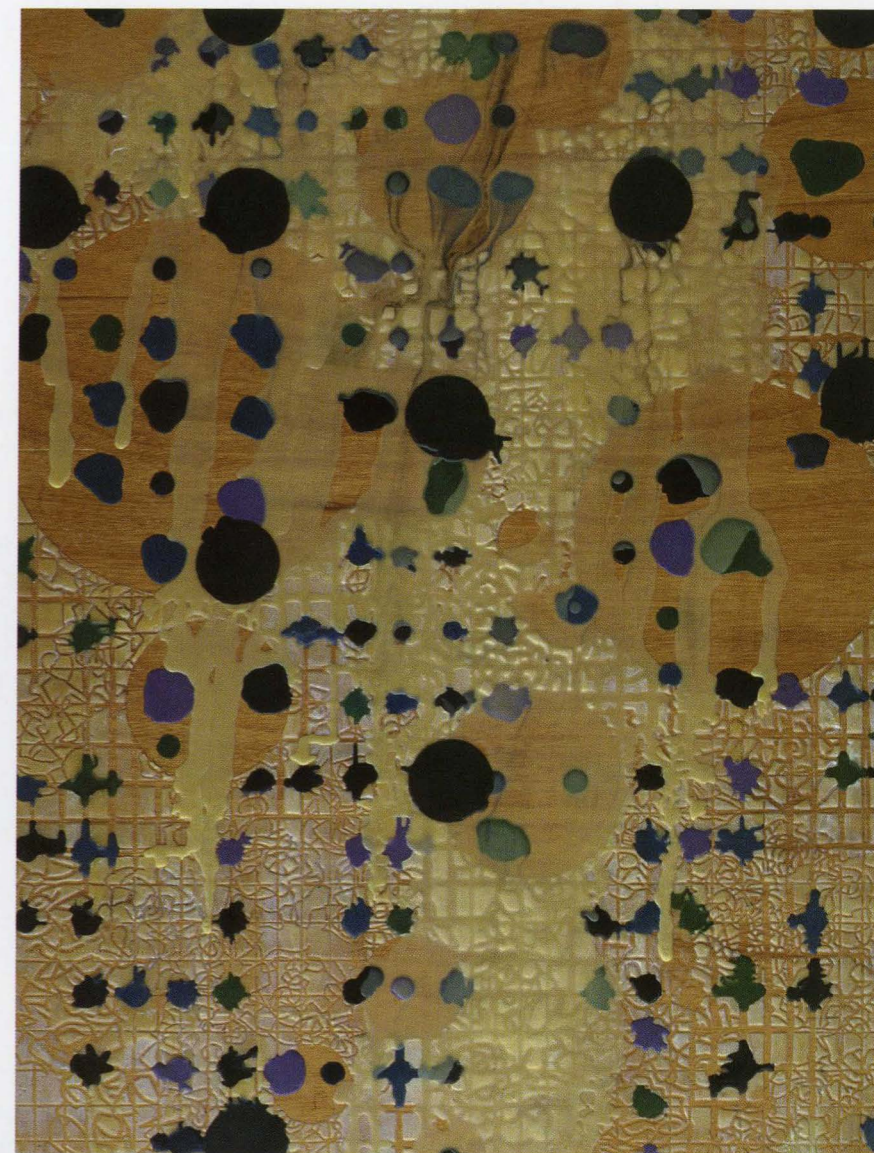
The image of Rose, the rose, is also present as a metaphorical structure in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, and some of Virginia Woolf's novels. Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is another great source.

MP: Do you see the rose, which is a common image in your art, as a symbol with both contemporary and historical resonance?

SO: The image of the rose brings many things together for me. The image has an exceptional

1. Gertrude Stein, "The World Is Round," in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946*, Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman, eds. (NY: Library of America, 1998), 537-574.

Mater Rosa #10
48" x 36", 1991
oil & encaustic on panel



plasticity—it is both sign and signifier—with multiple historical, literary, religious and popular references. Questions of gender identification and construction always arise, alongside sexuality, spirituality and all the conflicting things the rose has been used as a metaphor for. What I am trying to do is confound these significations through the repetition and fragmenting of the form, and to give room for another mode of experience.

MP: How does the process of making your paintings relate to your sources of inspiration?

SO: 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, although these relationships are not necessarily predetermined.

Currently, I am working with text (the letters r-o-s-e) 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.

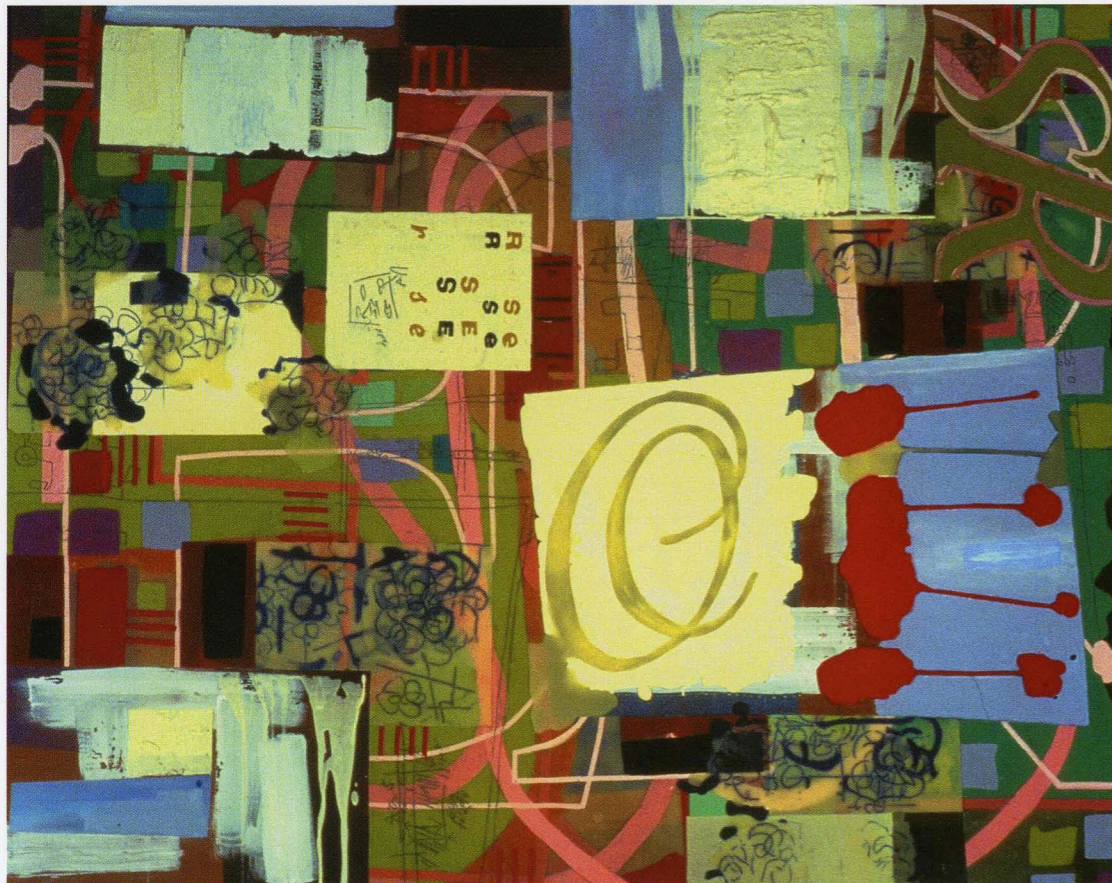
Tiepolo paintings where the clouds become the ground for the figures and they all float. Xena. Courbet seascapes. Tibetan Buddhist painting. East Indian miniatures. Teletubbies.

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."

Marina Pacini, Curator & Catalog Production
Larry Abokas, Catalog Designer
Carlisle Hacker, Catalog Editor

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



Eros #6
 18" x 24", 1998
 mixed media on paper

Sabina Ott was born in New York City and raised in Los Angeles. Currently, she lives and works in St. Louis where she is Director of Graduate Studies at the School of Art at Washington University.

1992 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, NY (1989, 1987, 1985)

EDUCATION

1981 San Francisco Art Institute, M.F.A.
 1979 San Francisco Art Institute, B.F.A.

1991 Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, CA (1990, 1988)

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1999 Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA (1997, 1995, 1994)

1990 The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

1989 Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA

1998 Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris, France

1987 Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago, IL

Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC (1995, 1993)

Galerie am Moritzplatz, Berlin, Germany

1997 Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis, MO

1986 Davies/Long Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

1996 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, Australia

Acme Art, San Francisco, CA

Storyhall Gallery, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

1985 Attack Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

1994 Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA

1983 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA

1982 A.R.E. Gallery, San Francisco, CA



Eros #4
18" x 24", 1998
mixed media on paper

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia
- 1999 McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA, "Hypersalon"
- Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ, "Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America"
- 1997 Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, "Women's Work: Examining the Feminine in Contemporary Painting"
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, "American Still Life and Interiors, 1915-1994, Selections from the Metropolitan Museum of Art"
- 1995 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, "Made in L.A.: Prints of Cirrus Editions"
- Center for Fine Arts, Miami, FL, "Abstraction"
- 1994 3 Day Weekend, Los Angeles, CA, "Dave's Not Here"
- 1993 Drawing Center, New York, NY, "The Return of the Cadaver Exquisite"

- 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

(cover) *subrosa #21*
84" x 72", 1994

oil & encaustic on panel

Courtesy of Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, CA