

2009

Bang!

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BANG!

A Thesis Presented

by

KIMBERLY HENNESSY

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University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Department of Art

BANG!

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

BANG!

MAY 2009

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BANG! is a thesis paper presented in conjunction with a visual art show that is made up of paintings, sculptures, and site specific installations. Primary ideas explored with the body of work are those of growth and expansion, energy, contradiction, excess, collection, play, drama, and nostalgia, specifically relating to color relationships and physical material.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Depending on the day, I approach artistic progress differently. Sometimes growth feels like unfurling a piece of paper seven feet across and making sweeping gestures with a pencil. Many days I'll sit bent over my table, painting fine detail on wooden blocks. Lots of times, it seems important to put things in piles. Once, I felt like I was *finally really getting somewhere* when I stacked two rolls of fluorescent duct tape on top of each other. I'm probably a painter, but I am definitely a collector, organizer and disorganizer. I'm maybe even a curator. Hopefully, I'm not a hoarder.

In my studio, concept and process are knotted together in a messy but functional union. Addressing concept without discussion of process, and vice versa, would not be productive. The important thematic threads in the show *BANG!* deal with energetic growth, controlled chaos, contradiction, immediacy, repetition, abundance, play and drama. There are ways that each of these ideas propel and inform my methodology, but even more often the structure of my practice runs the opposite way: I learn the Why after the How. My affinity for a full range of materials allows this push/pull relationship between process and concept to stay balanced. If a piece has a painted or drawn flat image, it depicts one of those conceptual ideas: hundreds of over-the-top strings of banners swirling tipsily overhead in a contradictory or physically impossible space; pile-ups and overflows from a chaotic production line; collapse after exertion. If a piece does not have just a flat image but is a collage or large scale installation, then the abundance, energetic growth, disorder/reorder, contradiction or immediacy was significant in the process.

CHAPTER 2

WE NEED SOME MORE NAPKINS (ENERGETIC GROWTH AND EXPANSION)

I love making lots of things and then arranging them in space. The paintings and assemblages of production overflow and excess in *BANG!* are no accident; they reflect my process. The way that I collage the individual elements in my installations is elastic and fluid. Piecing together a line made out of drawings, piles of paper, boxes and other ephemera across the floor is a physical, three-dimensional way of mirroring and expanding upon the paintings and drawings hanging on the wall. Just like a drawing, the installation starts at point A and works towards point (or points) B. The difference is that the installation portion of my work can easily and swiftly be re-routed, slowed down, or snapped back and hidden. What drives this activity is a need to build a stimulating environment of my own – however temporary – that is filled with fluctuating movement and vibrating energy.

In my drawings and paintings, flags are fluttering and dancing. Simple forms are multiplying and spreading like viruses. Lines and shapes turn liquid and sticky and run right off the page. These images feel like the moment when papers are swept up out of your hands into oncoming traffic, when birds flock overhead in a hypnotic breathe-in-breathe-out way, or when someone spills their Coke and everyone just watches the puddle spread for a second. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, lots of times temporary, but definite.

These versions of expansion that I am drawn to not only reflect personal proclivity – my need to create things and then arrange them - but a cultural inclination. National and global moods about growth, travel, interconnectedness and

persistence are, of course, relevant influences in this small world of the twenty-first century. These are moods of acquiescence to change and indecision; moods that have been shaped by multiple job relocations and snap decisions to buy plane tickets online at midnight. John Tomlinson talks about this in his book *The Culture of Speed*:

“The valuing of fixity, permanence and location – in everyday lifestyles, in attitudes and values – gives way to the valuing of mobility, flexibility, and openness to change. Constructing, planning and regulating give way to coping with uncertainty, and ‘going with the flow’; durability cedes to transience, the long term to the short term. Above all, in liquid modernity, distance becomes no object.”ⁱ

My work is filled with a universal sign for expansion, territorialism, and imperialism: the flag. I do think about territory and vast space when I’m working, but what I am struck by when I read about other artists who are dealing with ideas about globalism and expansion, specifically Julie Mehretu, is that my work is much more personal. While Mehretu works more in response to urban spaces, history, war and geography, my work (while peripherally engaging in those discourses) is predominantly dictated by my own personal impetus to keep making, accumulating, and expanding. Gilles Deleuze says in his book *The Fold*,

“Matter thus offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small, each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages, surrounded and penetrated by an increasingly vaporous fluid, the totality of the universe resembling a ‘pond of matter in which there exist different flows and waves’”ⁱⁱ

Water takes the shape of whatever vessel it is in. With this in mind, I am interested in site specificity. I fill whatever space I have. Walls are papered with images of relentless, colorful moving shapes. The floors are stacked with objects in

disarray and then suddenly organized into rows; some objects are perfect for the job and some seem like place-holders. Corners are filled. However it gets done, the need is clear – I'm here and I have to spread out.



Figure 1: Image from BANG!

CHAPTER 3

DON'T OPEN THAT! (CHAOS)

Although there are definite moments of contained organization, the dominant energy in *BANG!* is one of commotion, chaos, or post-chaos slump. The word “chaos” is carefully chosen because of the differences in understanding of its meaning. Popularly, we think of chaos as a synonym for random, flurried turmoil: *My studio is so chaotic*. Chaos theory, on the other hand, actually explains the opposite phenomenon, or an “order within disorder”ⁱⁱⁱ: systems that evolve and change exponentially with time, in a manner that appears random, but is in fact structurally predetermined. My work slips in and out of both meanings. In the pedestrian sense of the word, the marks I make and the piles I accumulate appear random and cluttered at first and second glance. Upon closer inquiry, though, one sees that I’ve often repeated the same symbol many times, and patterns start to emerge. In terms of process, my stance is closely related to chaos theory as well. What feel like random and intuitive decisions (even to me) are usually predetermined by my previous understanding of art and practice: what I’ve read in an art history book, seen on the internet, or learned from making previous work all inform my so-called “arbitrary” decisions.

This is not to say that chance isn’t important to me, or that the unruly things you see are really –ruly. Especially present in the paintings and drawings, the frenetic energy and nonsensical spaces create tensions that make the idea of a breaking point not only likely, but necessary. One has the sense of being on the brink of toppling over mid-spin. As in most frenzied experiences, a turning point is imminent– the

party has gone from festive to belligerent, the concert mob just got a little too drunk. I'm continually interested in the energy cycle of the euphoric *I'm having an awesome sixth birthday party at the skating rink!* to the traumatized *I'm exhausted, I hate you, so go away!* to finally the crashed-out nap on the car ride home. I find this lifecycle to be increasingly more and more relevant in personal and cultural realms. I am a young person living in the uncertain time period that is graduate school – there are many “what ifs” about my future. In addition to dealing with temporary, and sometimes fluctuating, working/living situations in my personal life, the experience of living and making art in the United States during the politically and economically slippery years of 2008 and 2009 have made the idea of toppling over any time seem possible, at the very least subconsciously.

There is almost a sense of overcompensation when looking at my work – the feeling that although the grip might be slipping, a brave front is being put on. Sometimes my images of cheery pink and yellow flags and first place blue ribbons seem somehow more akin to a sinister cover-up or a temporary band-aid than to a legitimate party. It is the classic punch line of a neatly shut closet door that is opened to reveal the hasty and frenetic “clean-up” that occurred right as company rang the doorbell – toppling balls and skis and clothes and shoes everywhere. Literally and figuratively this has ties to personal narrative both on micro and macro levels. In *BANG!*, autobiography and current events intersect in an opera influenced by everything from what I was drawn to at the thrift store to who might - or might not - become president.

CHAPTER 4

SUGAR IS SWEET, BUT ALSO GRITTY (CONTRADICTION)

There are strong elements of contradiction and ambiguity in *BANG!*, apparent in concept, process and media. My work consistently bestrides the opposing positions of slack versus tight, exclusive versus banal, precise versus chaotic, micro versus macro, and cheery versus spooky. My paintings depict strings of flags flying aloft one moment and then nettled in an unruly mound the next. Lines are pulled taught and then abruptly (apathetically? disappointedly?) left flaccid. Fastidiously detailed drawings are eclipsed by an impulsively thrown hand holding a big paintbrush full of cheap paint. Spaces feel simultaneously cavernous and claustrophobic. Moods swing from manic (hot pink razzle-dazzle stripes, piles of first place blue ribbons, faint traces of glitter) to depressed (ambiguously shaped black scaly masses, one lone string curling the floor, an overturned cardboard box).

The images and objects I keep making are Fun and Gorgeous! And then: Sort Of Nauseating. But wait: Kind Of Peculiar? And finally: Wow, Ominous. My studio practice involves no hierarchical charts of materials, methodologies or deliverables. The cardboard fruit box I keep the painting in might have just as great a chance of making the show as the painting itself (in fact, it did). I'll spend weeks on a "grand" painting, but then have the same satisfaction from placing an oily bakery bag next to a blue gardening cushion. Some of my most carefully detailed works on fine paper look best when overlapped by trash. Putting a raw material, like cardboard packaging, next to a labored-over painting is at once fresh, obvious, laid-back, timeless, and complete. It makes the line between Art and Real Life a little foggier.

It feels like when frayed jeans effortlessly make an otherwise expensive outfit sing. My personal history, in relation to my feelings about transience, immediacy, and disposability, has made this attraction to ambiguity, specifically in terms of material choice, especially relevant. Richard Flood, writing about the *Unmonumental* show at the New Museum states:

“While the masterpiece syndrome is understandable in a time of acute instability, it does not respond to its time, just the market. Our time demands the anti-masterpiece. Things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation feel right. Stubby, brutish forms that know something of the world in which they are made tell the contemporary story. Works that appear hurled into uncomfortable, anxious relationships run parallel to life... The materials used by many of today’s artists are redeemed from the rubbish heap and are Franciscan in their simplicity. Extravagant gestures have given way to a handshake or a hug (maybe even a shrug). The best of the work defies a simple knee-jerk response because it tends to be conversational, it wants to slow the passerby down for a chat. The work is not about delivering last words or winning a debate but about questioning everything from its formal properties to its place in the world... Beyond the masterpiece there lies nothing but freedom. And, as we learned from Kris Kristofferson, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Sculpture is one of the final frontiers for the artist who truly wants to tempt fate – the artist who prefers to utilize the carrot rather than chase it.”^{iv}

Making uncomfortable connections among objects pulled from the rubbish heap is, of course, an idea that’s been around the block. The phrase “cobbling together” calls to mind Picasso’s collages, Duchamp’s readymades, Rauschenberg’s Combines, Bourgeois’s soft sculptures, and Hirschhorn’s installations, to pluck just five names from a rich historical lineup. That the practice of “cobbling together” could come from such a prolific background but still seem so fresh with possibility excites me.

CHAPTER 5

THE POINT IS, WATCH MY SMOKE (IMMEDIACY)

Consideration of immediacy falls nicely into place after a brief examination of contradiction, especially in relationship to material choice and process. I'm drawn to casualness and approachability. Some of the quicksilver mark-making in my paintings and drawings feel almost like I doodled them while talking on the phone. Many of the materials that I use in my installations appear to be happenstance in their ordinariness. Packing materials, plastic bags, party supplies, recycled boxes and construction goods are snatched up from their place in my materials bin and thrust out onto the gallery floor, quickly altered or sometimes completely untouched. I am drawn to these materials because although they are commonplace, they all speak to me in a way that is highly aesthetic in terms of scale, color, and texture. I have had a lot of practice making art. It would be impossible at this point to separate myself completely from decisions that are aesthetic or highly designed. My practice of finding things from my ordinary life and choosing to usher them into the art realm is akin to any practiced, trained technician – whether subconscious or not, lots of the choices I make are on some level considered, and usually, at least “learned”. Appropriating these objects is again personal and autobiographical, smearing the boundary between my everyday and my finished art deliverable – raw material is also art object, cheap is also expensive, studio is also gallery.

I don't always just use what is close at hand, but there *is* a certain vivacity present in rash decision-making that I find exciting. The fact that the quickness of my process (whether in terms of mark-making or material choice) is evident in the end

also adds to the boisterous energy of the piece. In some areas, there is an evolution in the way that something is drawn – it starts out neat and tidy and becomes rushed, almost sloppy. Of course, this accelerated, rapid-fire artistic process is at home in contemporary culture, where anything accelerated or rapid-fire is king. John Tomlinson says about this immediacy:

“Indeed the term ‘immediacy’ is chosen, partly, *because* of its multivalence... It connotes, firstly ideas of a culture of instantaneity – a culture accustomed to rapid delivery, ubiquitous availability and the instant gratification of desire. And of course underpinning this, an economy and an associated work culture geared not just to sustaining but to constantly increasing this tempo of life. This is the sense which is closest to the trajectory of mechanical speed... Simultaneously however, immediacy can be taken to imply a sense of directness, of cultural *proximity*... In this second sense immediacy suggests not just an acceleration in culture, but a distinct *quality* to cultural experience. This may be variously grasped as a new kind of vibrancy in everyday life and perhaps (to use a rather pretentious term) a greater ‘haecceity’ to individual lived experience, as an increasing sense of connectedness with others, or as a prevailing sense of urgency and, perhaps, of compulsion and drivenness in our short-term preoccupations.”^v

The notion of “short-term preoccupations” may have a negative connotation, but I think this idea of many brief instances being stitched together into a bigger picture can create work that is laced with important personal history. Life is made up of a series of short moments. In *Drawings and Observations*, Louise Bourgeois talks about the importance of recording momentary thoughts and experiences:

“Drawings have a featherlike quality. Sometimes you think of something and it is so light, so slight, that you don’t have time to make note in your diary. Everything is fleeting, but your drawing will serve as a reminder: otherwise it would be forgotten...Sculpture involves so much physical involvement that you can rid yourself of your demons through sculpting. Drawing doesn’t have that pretension. Drawing is just a little help.”^{vi}

My definition of drawing includes the sculptural building and patching-together-of-objects involved in the installation portions of *BANG!* Edges are aligned and associated with each other to create what is essentially a drawn line, spreading across the floor and up the walls. While three-dimensional and physical, this act of collecting and rearranging many objects is as connected to the idea of quickness as the hurried marks I make with pencil.



Figure 2: Image from *BANG!*

CHAPTER 6

MORE, PLEASE (REPETITION, ACCUMULATION, EXCESS)

The repeated image or object is a major formal underpinning of my work and is meaningful in different ways. Sometimes the act of repeating an image is a trial of endurance or a tool to illustrate enveloping magnitude. In large-scale drawings, hundreds of tiny triangles or pieces of fringe create an overwhelming frenetic atmosphere. Scale is uncertain and one can imagine that the painted space stretches on, borderless. Concurrently, the buildups of the same shape, over and over, allow the viewer to imagine the laborious process of the artist, and a large stretch of passed time. Massive quantities and substantial commitment to time build up a vast presence. This buildup helps to illustrate growth, speed, and wild energy. Kant's partial description of the dynamic sublime has some threads of relevance here. Using the ocean as a symbol of nonnegotiable force, he explains the freedom that comes with surrender to overwhelming energy fields.

“For Kant, the feeling of dynamic sublime arises from the contrast between two mental states: first the abject dependence on unmasterable forces, and then the freedom that comes with the awareness that thinking is a different kind of experience. The image of a person standing on a beach, looking out at a pounding surf, feeling a sense of mingled freedom, paralysis, horror, loneliness, humility, confusion and comfort, is an age-old trope of peril and salvation.”^{vii}

While not connected to ideas about salvation and loneliness, the spaces that I create are sometimes difficult to maneuver and vast. Standing in front of the huge paintings or walking through the arrangement of product multiples could hold the propensity for simultaneous provocation and play.

Formally, repetition works to create hazy critical mass, facilitating the manipulation of space. There is collectivity and conformity and then suddenly something breaks away. This links back to my connection with ambivalent themes: spaces are packed full, and then eerily left empty. Additionally, the act of repeating a specific image helps turn the image into something more universal, negating the possible connotations that the represented image may have. A drawing of one pennant flag is read differently than a drawing of thousands: in the latter the subject is not the flag but the consciousness behind the accumulation of many. What is alone a pennant flag turns into a field of trees, a flock of bats, a field full of soldiers, or simply a color field, when multiplied by the hundreds. Kate Armstrong talks about this transcendence through repetition in her book *Crisis and Repetition* as

“the attempt to figure the unfigurable through a repetition of the signifier that, in excess, leads to a transcendence of the signifier. The resulting transcendence of meaning doubles for the lost transcendent realm that is the impetus for the repetition in the first place. When signification is cut loose from notions of transcendent meaning, the sign becomes the “sign of a sign”. The sign operates within an endless play of meanings that cannot refer to any referent in the absence of the transcendent realm.”^{viii}

Sometimes the repeated image or mass collection is a parade of excess and wealth. My color and material choices suggest a flaunting of material objects, which has for many years been a national pastime. This is a new, disposable Baroque: Jewels are rented and luxury cars are temporarily leased, but even on a smaller scale, material objects are accumulated and revered, then tired of and tossed, from shoes and electronics to name brand coffees and meals out to eat. This idea is especially relevant when one looks at my work with the far-off and removed manufacturing facility in mind. The absurdity of one blue plastic “baroque” picture frame I bought

for a dollar at Michael's is magnified when it is lined up next to six others. We all know who made these, and we all know it wasn't a French craftsman who competed for the honor of a prestigious apprenticeship. Comparing the trends of the French Renaissance to contemporary culture, Rebecca Zorach states,

“And what of our experience? Relics and rituals of luxury are still popular... We pay attention to the spectacle of the Oscars; we watch royal weddings and presidential funerals. If we are sensitive to our participation in the global economy (on which most of us have little influence, and in which most people don't have enough to eat) we may have questions in our own lives about where to draw the line between sufficiency and excess.”^{ix}

But what my work really might be is a display of wealth's simulacrum. The excess in my work is both complementary and contradictory to Baroque ideals – instead of gold and jewels meticulously festooning friezes, cardboard scales and paper fringe is building up and overflowing off of shoeboxes (from shoes bought on clearance). It is bright and beautiful at first glance. At second glance, one realizes, it is humble and probably disposable. In opposition to ideas about excess and wealth, humility is an idea that is suddenly en vogue. It is now “on trend” to challenge conspicuous consumption: the excess that for so long defined our culture has imploded. Now commercials suggest it is okay to do at-home pedicures and exchange plain gold wedding bands. For goodness' sake, this was the year of the staycation. This social influence manifests itself in the way I choose materials and space. Again, contradiction is at play - materials seem rich but are upon closer inspection poor. Spaces are filled to the brim with Important Things and then they are left empty (repossessed?).

CHAPTER 7

CAN YOU HEAR ME FROM WHERE YOU'RE STANDING? (DRAMA/PLAY)

My work persistently engages thoughts of set design, over-the-top makeup that gets your attention from the balcony, carnivals, MTV music videos, the confetti that falls at the end of political conferences, used car lots, Disneyland, and sometimes, unfortunately, the Miss America Pageant. Theatrics, as well as threads about attention, wealth, playtime, and competition, are important to my work. *BANG!* isn't quiet, in fact, it is probably pretty obnoxious. Although I have little interest in theater in a literal sense, there is some autobiography and narrative laced into the drama. I've already mentioned ideas revolving around political excitement and dramatic media and consumption. Those ideas are in sync with the denotations of attention and competition that are fast and loose in *BANG!* I'm also looking at this body of work the way that any artist does: an opus that reflects his or her interests and reality. Okay: I'm dramatic, colorful, and sometimes contradictory.

There is another level of drama in *BANG!*, however, that is related to performance and involved with immersion that the viewer has as he or she experiences the space, specifically the walls and floor. Together with the imagery enveloping the walls, the work building up all over the floors creates a space that requires a certain level of participation from the viewer. At the very least, he or she must decide about where to walk. I am from a painting background, and so my work still heavily references the picture plane. Instead of activating the space in a sculptural sense, I am more inclined to think about the walls and floor as extensions of the canvas. The floor is a piece of

paper and the things that I arrange on it are equivalent to a pencil line. Insisting that the viewer navigate through this sort of extended drawing:

“abolishes the dividing line between performers and spectators, since everyone becomes an active participant and everyone communes in the carnival act, which is neither contemplated nor, strictly speaking, performed; it is lived. Performance becomes life within the paradigm of camp. Carnival unifies the sacred with the profane, the significant with the insignificant, the original with the copy.”^x

In *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*, Allen Kaprow wrote about this extension of the canvas onto the structure of the room:

“The differences which were once so clear between graphic art and painting have practically been eliminated; similarly, the distinctions between painting and collage, between collage and construction, between construction and sculpture, and between some large constructions and a quasi architecture... this has brought sharply into focus the fact that *the room has always been a frame or format too.*”^{xi}

This article was written in the early sixties with Neo-Dada and Assemblage artists like Rauschenberg in mind, and was critical of the continued relevance of the gallery space. While I, inversely, find the architecture of the space inspiring and not obsolete, I like thinking about the room as a “frame” or skeleton for my work, specifically the outer planar surfaces.

One artist that I admire on both conceptual and aesthetic levels is Thomas Hirschhorn, whose large scale installations “are archival – meant to be read as well as experienced.”^{xii} Hirschhorn’s work closely investigates, in part, power relationships relating to value, political relationships, and consumer goods. These ideas have relevance to the work in *BANG!*, but what I’m especially drawn to in Hirschhorn’s work are his material choices, his sense of humor, and his “inclusion” of the viewer in the piece.

“For the past decade he has combined deliberately ramshackle materials (cardboard, packing tape, aluminum foil, nylon, and wood scraps) with a delicately calibrated non-stance toward the political material and consumer goods included in his “displays”... Hirschhorn’s indiscriminate associations mimic the slide of object value into the more nebulous realm of sign-exchange. Yet his non-ideological, intentionally simplistic approach also places responsibility on the viewer to become active participants and to ascribe value where there is none.”^{xiii}

Hirschhorn is able to use the gallery space but still walk the line of painting, collage, construction and sculpture that Kaprow discusses, using what Hirschhorn himself calls “cheap tricks and stupid things” to jokingly jab the shoulder of hegemonic relationships.



Figure 3: Thomas Hirschhorn, *Stand-Alone*, 2007

CHAPTER 8

GRAVITY AS GLUE (INSTALLATION)

Building an installation with a combination of drawings, altered found objects, and product multiples has its thrilling crescendo during the physical construction. Not knowing where the sixteen red foam cones will end up, and then suddenly *knowing*, feels as much like art-making as painting; sometimes more so. I might use the word “magical”. An educated intuition and rashness play important roles in my installation process. I’ve talked about my choice to use both unaltered found objects and manipulated surfaces together to create this installation, which could also be considered a large scale drawing or collage. I like the idea of calling this work a collage, because I do think of the floor as a surface that acts like paper. Collage also has connotations in which I’m very interested: those of immediacy, humility, approachability, accumulation and consumption.

“Collage is a dirty medium, infected as it is by waste. It appropriates residues and leftovers, trafficking with what is deemed to be valueless. Its origins are more than modest – they are almost sordid and impure, for collage feeds off the pollution of visual culture. Collage casts its roots into a lower, inferior realm, as it scavenges through dark matters and seedy places.”^{xiv}

I can’t help but think about Robert Rauschenberg’s *Combines* when I’m making this work, and his quest to “act in the gap” between art and life. Rauschenberg’s use of objects from his own life left his imprint or residue while still keeping his authorship nebulous enough to produce multiple reads.

“In the collective mind of the art world, the idea of a Rauschenberg Combine does not promise compactness and conceptual economy:

standard expectations anticipate the sprawling, random, crowded and untidy.”^{xv}

Likewise, my collection of components used in *BANG!* was curated with the hopes of imparting multivalent meaning without losing my specific hand. In addition, last-minute intuition is important here – having all of the pieces of the work in boxes the day before the show opens adds to unpredictability of the installation portion. This unpredictability gives me a lot of pleasure. There is always some level of planning, of course, but the broader the materials and the more open I keep my ideas about how things might end up, the more successful I feel.



Figure 4: Robert Rauschenberg, *Slug*, 1961

CHAPTER 9

CHEAP AND QUICK SEDUCTION (COLOR)

The colors used in the show *BANG!* are emotional but not didactic. There is not a specific narrative in mind as much as a physical sensuality. Color choices present in the paintings are closely related to beauty, opticality, and contemporary culture. “Eye candy” would be an appropriate phrase here – but the kind of candy we’re talking about is not organic or sweetened with honey. It’s cheap, processed, delicious junk that will burn the roof of your mouth, and you can find it at CVS, not your community co-op. This parallel stresses yet again the importance and prevalence of immediacy, abundance, ease and accessibility throughout my work.

The objects used in the installation portion of the show were mostly bought at discount chains and thrift stores, or taken out of the garbage. They were chosen with an eye for their color and surface – in most cases, the more artificial, the better. Primary yellow envelopes are placed next to a picture frame lacquered red. Brilliant, uniformly blue foam pads are compared to a slightly more brilliant but less uniformly blue mushroom carton. I matched the green in one of my small drawings to the green of some party toothpicks I had left over, and then to the green of an old, beat-up plastic folder from Staples. Tie-backs in electric pink, yellow, green, and orange that were purchased in a fever (*I can’t believe Home Depot has such beautiful things!*) are integrated in next to the small scale drawings on cardboard boxes. I shamelessly used an Urban Outfitters shopping bag that was lined in just the perfect pink. The Nike box from my new running shoes was just the “classic orange” I wanted. Even the “neutral” colored objects are manufactured approximations: the crisp, radial-edged

pieces of cardboard packaging are the color of natural wood. The natural wood itself is whitewashed with gesso and dipped in hot pink paint. “Vulgar and sharp; commercial and contingent; intense, brash and impure.”^{xvi}

When referencing emotional color it’s necessary to address autobiography. Almost like a forensic investigation, my color choices can be linked to me by studying my origins and current interests. A little girl born in Middle America in the eighties, I grew up eating frozen yogurt (“fro-yo”) at fluorescent strip malls that I rode to on a bike with neon beads clipped onto the spokes. At home, my dad played a hot pink electric guitar in the basement, while upstairs my mom and I baked Crayola-ed Shrinkie-Dinks in the oven. Dance costume after sparkly dance costume piled up in my closet as I racked up the recitals. My hair was crimped, my clothes puffy-painted, and all ten of my fingernails painted a different color. Shaped by thousands of aesthetic experiences, I turned into a young adult who makes work while keeping her thumb on contemporary trends (but isn’t afraid of a little nostalgia).

What we can’t ignore any longer is the color pink. My affinity for using shades of it in my work is based on so much: it commands attention, it polarizes, is nauseating and simultaneously the famous spokes model for anti-nausea. It’s just really pretty. It’s *so* fake. Says Barbara Nemitz in her book *Pink: the Exposed Color in Contemporary Art*,

“Pink is the color of the fantastic. Boundaries are crossed. Pink animals become less animal-like. Hasn’t the flamingo always been more of an art figure than a real animal?”^{xvii}

The color pink in the show *BANG!* calls to mind questions about feminism, construction materials, candy and the Barbie aisle (“pink aisle”) at Target. All of those connotations, and none of them, are relevant.

One thing that I think about over and over again, specifically, is where my work fits in with the lineage of feminist art. On the one hand, I feel that there are several aspects of my work that scream “female artist”- the decorative images, some of the methods I use to create pieces (sewing and arranging), and of course, my color palette. I am aware of the ways in which these practices have helped enrich art history, from *Woman House* to Louise Bourgeois to Tracy Emin. On the other hand, I look at the ways that my work could be interpreted as “female” and sort of shrug my shoulders. Ideas about decoration and style, craft, and color palette are as much about contemporary trend as they are about my genetics. Much more so, actually, especially when it comes to color.

“The qualities we associate with the pastel color pink are quite diverse. They range from sensitive, tender, youthful, artificial or unreal to eccentric, sweet, vulnerable, and pleasurable. The color is at home in both “high” and “low” culture. Pink may be perceived as unpleasant, perhaps even embarrassing at times, or as appealing and enjoyable. And it is quite simply associated with the idea of beauty.”^{xviii}

The diversity of these connotations is what is important. Somehow, pink became my neutral.



Figure 5: Real Flamingos



Figure 6: Fake Flamingos

CHAPTER 10

TRUST ME, I WENT TO SCHOOL FOR THIS (BEAUTY/TASTE)

The discussion of color leads to an admittance of the importance of personal taste and beauty in my work. Opinions on these subjects had to be cultivated. As a student who has been entrenched in art and art history classes for years, it is impossible to detach myself from the artists and movements that came before me. Artists like Rauschenberg and Hirschhorn have been influential, but so have so many others, from Duchamp to That One Guy In My Intro To Painting Class Sophomore Year Who Used A Lot Of Pastel Oil Paint. In terms of taste, the aesthetics of the show *BANG!* are directly associated with aforementioned autobiographical and personal references to my history and current leisure practice. As a complement to my aesthetic upbringing, I currently look at a lot of books, am interested in fashion, and read too many design blogs. Outside aesthetic influences seep in no matter how tight we try to seal up the cracks (and I've sort of given up trying). In terms of beauty and its relevance to my work, I have a more emphatic stance: the beautiful is powerful. The observation of beauty is a universal, inspiring experience.

“Staring... is a version of the wish to create; it is directly connected to acts of drawing, describing, composing, lovemaking.”^{xix}

This “wish to create” is complemented by the evolution of thinking towards what is exceptional and what is normal that can happen when beauty is experienced.

“The benefit of the extraordinary is two-fold: first, in the demands it (without our invitation) places on us on its own behalf; second, in the pressure it exerts toward extending the same standard laterally”^{xx}

Traditional concepts about the ordinary and extraordinary are not at play in my work. I've talked about ambivalent imagery and materials. My work isn't all beautiful- there are those moments I've mentioned where something sinister or at least unsettling peeks through. This duality of beauty and something-not-so-beautiful (I'm not sure if "ugliness" is the right word) is related to a presence of the sublime.

As James Elkins states

"... the beautiful and the sublime are complements, equals and opposites: the beautiful produces pleasure, while the sublime incites confusion, displeasure, and even "horror"; the beautiful belongs to taste and aesthetics, while the sublime exceeds both... It's important, in this context, that the beautiful has no threshold: it is self-contained, so its prettinesses, its harmonies and inner coherences, are all of a piece. No matter how the two experiences mingle in recent painting, the sublime is always broken: it entails aporia, uncertainty, inadequacy, and even an unpleasant or painful disorientation."^{xxi}

Contradiction is again at play. Beauty and its opponent are strengthened by each other. "The sublime *moves*... Beauty *charms*."^{xxii}



Figure 7: Image from BANG!

CHAPTER 11

MAY 2ND, 2009
(CONCLUSION)

While the decision to keep planning to a minimum and just shoot from the hip on the day of the installation was a crucially important one, the waiting did not come without its own set of apprehensions. At the top of my list of worries was the prospect of the scale of my works not looking at home in the gallery space. There was also a small part of me that thought *What am I doing? I've just spent a year making little odds and ends and then tucking them into the corner of my filthy studio. There's no way this is going to come together with any cohesion.*

I woke up at five in the morning on May 2nd, Installation Day, and went over to the gallery by myself while my installation team slept. It was surreal to finally be living the moment that for so long had just been an “X” on a calendar. My first sigh of relief/smile/wave of goose bumps came when I was finished pulling in and laying out every single object on the east gallery floor. Things seemed related. I remembered why I liked this experience.

There are several things I'm proud of when I reflect on that weekend. I'm really happy that I trusted my instincts. If I had an idea, I did it immediately. Sometimes, when I had no ideas about what to do next, I just did *something*; anything to keep the momentum going. I pretended like I was just in my studio and reminded myself that nothing was permanent, *that things could be changed*. I tried to keep a sense of humor. I tried to balance gut intuition with editing (but not too much editing).

I'm delighted that I was able to respond to the space in a way that came naturally to me. Instead of rolling my eyes at the ugly light fixture right by the door, I used it

to prop up a Hennessy bottle that looked like it was spilling hot pink drink stirrers onto the floor. On the wall outside my gallery to the right of the main entrance is a classic red fire alarm. Instead of feeling like it was encroaching on my space, I built a column of paper flames growing out of the top of it that curls up the ceiling and licks the opposite wall. In the hallway between the two spaces, the acid yellow wall that leads down to the supply closet confused me at first (*acid yellow walls in a space where people show artwork?*). But that acid yellow paint turned out to be a great compliment to a set of acid yellow plastic bags I bought when I first moved to Massachusetts.

Another thing about which I'm really proud is that I was able to incorporate many works from the past three years, not just things I made this year with the intention of using them in the show. It felt good to incorporate in the mini-crescendos that have kept me going during my time in graduate school: the string of beads that I dipped in tennis-ball-yellow paint, the pile of hand-sewn flags that I labored over all last year, the sketchy drawings I did this summer that prepared me for the large scale paintings. Building a collaboration between "thesis pieces" and old favorites felt like I was making an accurate proclamation.

I'm very pleased with the outcome of the show. I do feel a sense of accomplishment and closure, but the most beautiful thing is that I'm now full of fresh questions and challenges for myself after seeing everything installed. *What if next time I eliminated paper completely? What if I moved more into the center "air space" of the gallery? What if I decided to somehow make this more physically interactive?*

In the end, the experience of creating the show BANG! felt less like a shrug of the shoulders, and more like a mid-game high five.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

There are no individual pieces with titles in the show BANG!, but rather I see the installation as one unified work that has several different zones. In some of the zones there are large scale paintings/drawings that are done on Arches 100% rag cold press watercolor paper. Those images are made using a variety of media, including Cotman watercolors, Dr. Ph. Martin's Radiant Concentrated Water Color, Bic Mark-It Fine Point permanent markers, Apple Barrel brand acrylic craft paint, graphite, glue, and foil gum wrappers.

In other zones there are assemblages/collages that are made up of varied original art pieces and found objects, including but not limited to: fiberglass tubing, Clementine boxes, cardboard packaging, hot lava colored posterboard, crepe paper rolls, pink foam insulation, mushroom and strawberry containers, yarn, gold seals, felt letters, sticky labels, duct tape, storage boxes, yard sale tags, fluorescent zip ties, foam party hats, old scarves, gardening cushions, fake diamonds, plastic cups, cheap picture frames, and pretend bricks.

FLOOR PLAN

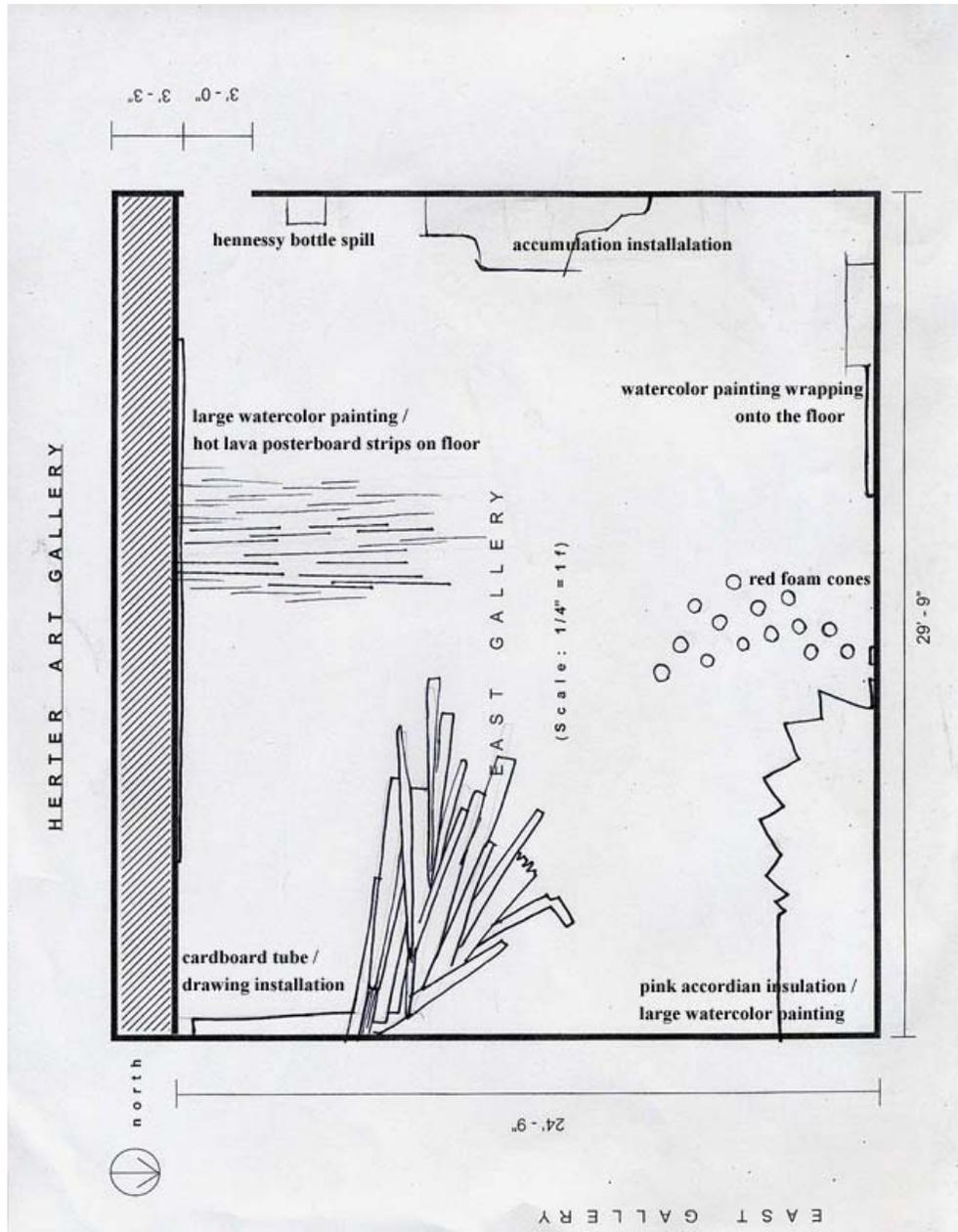


Figure 8: Floor Plan

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PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK



Figure 9: Photo of the artist at work

IMAGE IDENTIFICATION SHEET

Image 1.....	BANG! 1
Image 2.....	BANG! 2
Image 3.....	BANG! 3
Image 4.....	BANG! 4
Image 5.....	BANG! 5
Image 6.....	BANG! 6
Image 7.....	BANG! 7
Image 8.....	BANG! 8
Image 9.....	BANG! 9
Image 10.....	BANG! 10
Image 11.....	BANG! 11
Image 12.....	BANG! 12
Image 13.....	BANG! 13
Image 14.....	BANG! 14
Image 15.....	BANG! 15
Image 16.....	BANG! 16
Image 17.....	BANG! 17
Image 18.....	BANG! 18
Image 19.....	BANG! 19
Image 20.....	BANG! 20
Image 21.....	BANG! 21
Image 22.....	BANG! 22
Image 23.....	BANG! 23
Image 24.....	BANG! 24
Image 25.....	BANG! 25

- ⁱ Tomlinson, John. The Culture of Speed. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007. 78.
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