

ARTFORUM

Sarah Crowner

09.05.11



Sarah Crowner is a Brooklyn-based artist whose vibrant sewn paintings have been based on specific compositions from the past, such as early works by Victor Vasarely and Lygia Clark. In two concurrent shows this fall, Crowner presents new work that amplifies her previous methods while setting them on a new course. "Acrobat" opens at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York on September 7 and "Ballet Plastique" opens at Galerie Catherine Bastide in Brussels on September 11.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, I painted with a certain impatience about painting. Its flatness, its weight and slowness, irritated me somehow. So I turned my back on it for a time and started to explore ceramic sculpture. As it happened, there was something about using my hands and manipulating clay that led me back to painting, but in a different way. I realized that I wasn't interested in the conventional fixity of these media; I didn't want to wait for a line of paint or some clay to dry. I wanted more immediacy and spontaneity, and I realized that I could just treat a painting like a collage: Cut up forms, arrange them on the ground, rearrange them, and sew them up again. The physicality of this approach, using paint, canvas, and a stretcher, as if to make an object rather than a picture, made sense to me.

I've been occupied with making sewn and shaped geometric canvases since then. Each new work contributes to this project. An encounter with one piece—a symmetrical diptych with bright, sharp, red triangles on either side—led to the new bodies of work I'm showing this fall. Between the red triangles there is an exposed center of raw linen, an unfolding square of white paint, and, below this, black rectangles. It struck me as theatrical curtains opening onto an empty stage—a proscenium painting. The image of the stage was the result of the collaging process, and my interest—in this case—to play with symmetry. I spent time looking at the work alone, and with people standing in front of it, yet still couldn't shake the idea that it was a backdrop with an open curtain.

I'm curious about the impact of time on our experience of painting: What does time do to an abstract collection of static forms? If you walk into a gallery or museum you might experience a painting for as little as one minute—but what if that same painting is hanging in your living (or work) space for thirty-five years? Or what if you were seated in an auditorium "watching" that painting—perhaps with dancers moving in front of it—for, say, forty-five minutes? What is that experience? How can its quality and contours change inside the frame of a minute, forty-five minutes, or thirty-five years? These hypothetical propositions are compelling to me as I manipulate the materials that come together in my work. I hope that somehow they translate, such that the exhibitions *could* be read as proposals to choreographers and theater directors.

The paintings thus materialize as backdrops, or proposals for backdrops, for an undefined performance or theatrical event. In Brussels, I'm showing a series of paintings on three walls. Hung tightly together, they will appear as one continual painting with various compositions and forms colliding. I'm building a stage in the gallery, a simple low plywood platform. To encounter the paintings, viewers will have to step up onto the stage and assume the position of performers.

In New York, a similarly tight row of canvases will cover the walls like a frieze. To accompany the paintings, I'm working on a group of small wooden sculptures, about thirty inches tall, with flat geometric-shaped fronts and

curved and linear backings. I see these as tabletop maquettes for stage props. Together, they recast my questions around painting; they offer the idea that a painting or a sculpture might function as a proposal for something else. If a painting can suddenly read as a huge backdrop, could a small sculpture be a model for something larger than life? Rather than qualifying the status of painting or sculpture, it retools these forms, giving them a new feeling and a new function in space, one that invites movement, interaction even.

I'm always using art history as a medium, cutting it up and trying to reengage it. In these new bodies of work I'm thinking about moments in the early twentieth century when the avant-gardes were collaborating freely and cross-pollinating from music to theater to painting to poetry (think of Hannah Höch's Dada dolls, Sophie Taeuber-Arp's sculptural puppets and set decorations, Maria Jarema's abstract theatrical backdrops, or Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus theater workshop). This is a departure from my previous work employing specific compositions, and this wider conceptual field has also added a new dimension, perhaps somehow historicizing the physicality and material immediacy that has entered my process. The mediation on "medium" has expanded the sense of that word, for me. If wood or clay or paint acts as one kind of medium, supporting and *materializing* thought at the level of intimate engagement, then the scale and dynamics of performance and the metaphysics of stagecraft might conduct another kind of channeling.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*