



Whitney Biennial 2010

Whitney Museum of American Art
25 February 30 May 2010

SARAH CROWNER

Sarah Crowner confronts the history of abstract painting and sculpture with the often-marginalized traditions of decorative and applied arts. Her sewn, painted canvases; rough-hewn ceramic vessels; and mosaic tiles not only question the privileged space of the fine arts, but also function as critical interventions within it.

In some of her recent work, Crowner assembles angular pieces of painted canvas and unpainted linen using a sewing machine. The geometric compositions and unmodulated passages of color evoke Hard-Edge paintings of the 1950s and 1960s, and in some cases Crowner appropriates specific compositions of that era as "templates." However, the visible seams that result from Crowner's process interrupt the slick surfaces of those works. "The 'hard edges' are now sewn," Crowner writes, "exposing the stitch of the thread." The act of sewing, with connotations of domestic labor, deflates high Modernism's rhetoric of transcendent opticality by evoking the tactility of a quilt.

By using new materials to reconstitute the artistic legacies she describes as the "ghosts of art history," Crowner foregrounds the aesthetic heterogeneity latent with in abstract paintings of the 1950s. Her canvases engage the psychologically complex practice of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, and the obliquely mystical "open form" works by the Swedish painter Olle Baertling, more than they do the macho aloofness of the American paintings that all too frequently serve as an emblem of that period.

Crowner's investigation into what she calls "the dialectic between Modernism and various practices of craft" extends to ceramics. Her unglazed vessels and mosaic tiles reference episodes in twentieth-century art when the experimental impulses of painting and sculpture could not be separated from concurrent developments in the decorative arts. Beatrice Wood, a key figure in the New York Dada scene and a pioneering ceramicist, looms large in Crowner's practice and was the inspiration for her series, *Handbuilt Vessels* (2008). Like Wood, Crowner balances a self-conscious negotiation of "fine" art with the rich tradition of the handmade.

