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Sarah Crowner

BY ISOBEL HARBISON

Simon Lee Gallery, London, UK

There's a diverting sense of horizon shifting at play when standing before Sarah Crowner's new works at Simon Lee Gallery. 'Plastic Memory', the New York-based artist's first solo show in the UK, brings together new ceramic pieces and patchwork paintings, manipulation techniques she adopted some years ago to introduce, in her words, 'immediacy and spontaneity' to her painting. *Untitled* (all works 2016) greets us, white acrylic on white canvas cut into 22 non-identical pieces and re-sewn, then stretched taught. Inside its frame, arcs and triangles meet pentagons and other asymmetric shapes. In each section, a watery acrylic brushstroke moves in a different direction. It's a dynamic interior boxed off by a wooden frame painted acidic red, neon almost, glowing against the white wall behind. It's a smart, swift introduction into Crowner's process: painting, washing, splitting, devising, reconstructing, tightening, offsetting and elevating.



Sarah Crowner, 'Plastic Memory', 2016, exhibition view at Simon Lee Gallery, London. All images courtesy: the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London

This process is adapted to ceramics in *Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves)* – a tiled platform raised six inches above the ground on a visible timber frame, which extends almost flush to the gallery's L-shape floor. The tiles have been made and glazed by specialist Spanish ceramicists and differing shades of white emerge on their surface from their final firing. Each one is an irregular pentagon, a shape Crowner has set into a repetitive, slowly discernable pattern. The narrow gap between wall and platform creates a shadowy periphery similar to *Untitled's* frame. Here the floor is the pictorial plane, grouted platform mimicking stitched canvas. Both painting and platform are geometric abstractions that Crowner has arrived at by way of various applied art and performative influences. In past works she's referenced mid-century decor: from an avant-garde theatre curtain designed by Polish artist Maria Jarema in 1956, to the background motifs of a 1950s Harper's Bazaar fashion shoot, to Josef Hoffmann's fabric patterns. These references are drawn together in paintings and ceramics resembling the work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp or Lygia Clark, amongst other artists who cross-pollinated their painterly abstractions with experiments in sculpture, architecture, craft, textiles and performance.



Sarah Crowner, *Sliced Black Tree*,
2016, acrylic on canvas, sewn, 1.5
x 1.2 m

Crowner introduced platforms into her work in 2011, so there's long been a sense that as viewers, we're implicated in her theatre of display. However, here we seem less enclosed in a reflexive *mise-en-scène*, than a cool antechamber to the great outdoors. *Sliced Black Tree* strikes painted black sections into white canvas sheets, a stark arboreal form. Natural elements materialize through Crowner's processes too, with liquid and light evoked by the coloration of canvas pieces or pigmented ceramics. Clay's 'plastic memory', the marks it preserves after being fired, is a material sensitivity that's shared by painting and this tactility or physicality permeates throughout her works. We get submerged in *Untitled*, all pieces painted a deep blue lapped by notes of teal and turquoise; and elsewhere, in *Sliced Red*, among fourteen white panels, seven of fiery red appear, bearing down upon us like an angry morning sky.



Sarah Crowner, front: *Untitled*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, sewn, and painted wooden frame, 122 x 91 cm; back: *Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves)*, 2016, glazed terracotta tiles, plywood, mortar and grout, 4.3 x 3.1 m

The second of the ceramic pieces, *Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves)*, uses the same tile shape and pattern as the first but is vertical and wall mounted. The surface of these glazed blue tiles seems penetrable. Standing alongside it, we might also be lying on the floor of a swimming pool or a deep seabed. It seems incredible, given the ostensible familiarity of painterly abstraction, that the work manages to feel so physically compelling. And that after this sensation something purposeful lingers. Crowner's grouting, stitching and elevating subtly expose the seams, margins and carefully constructed platforms that are part of the history of abstraction. There is value – necessity, even – in unpicking the hard edges of an avant-garde narrative that has so often excluded female artists, in treating it as a memory as plastic and malleable as clay's.