

ARTFORUM

Sarah Crowner
SIMON LEE | LONDON

View of "Sarah Crowner," 2016. On floor: Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves), 2016. On wall, from left: Sliced Red, 2016; Sliced Black Tree, 2016; Untitled, 2016. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography.

Having gained wide recognition for sewn canvases and tile platforms that are reminiscent of hard-edge geometrical abstraction and sometimes double as theater sets, in her recent works Sarah Crowner continues combining and recasting modernist abstraction and applied arts, but in ways that evoke the curvilinear forms and colors of nature. The eight sewn canvases and two tile pieces in the exhibition "Plastic Memory" transported the viewer simultaneously into the cool white-tiled Futurist-influenced interiors of Italian designer Nanda Vigo, such as the one she devised for *Lo Scarabeo sotto la Foglia* (1964), a house designed by Giò Ponti, which gave the title to Crowner's concurrent exhibition at MASS MoCA, "Beetle in the Leaves," and the hot landscapes of the Mediterranean, where her glazed ceramic tiles were fired. The slivers of canvas and linen mostly painted red or white in *Sliced Red* (all works 2016) blaze like the sun, the turquoise-blue waves in *Sliced Warm Blue* drift by like the sea or the sky, and the black branches in *Sliced Plant* grow like trees, while the patterns in the white-tile Platform (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves) and celadon-tile Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves) spread like foliage.

This joining of parts to form a whole operated both at the level of each individual work and in the exhibition overall, involving painting, architecture, and the viewer's body. The slicing—conveying the artist's spontaneity and physical effort in cutting up and reassembling the sewn canvases—contrasted sharply with the layout of an irregular pentagon pattern, based on a recent discovery in the field of mathematics, that tiles a plane in mirrored pairs. With its visual similarity to the abstract white sewn canvases with black or white seams, the grouted, white-tiled platform resembled a kind of painting, even as the kinesthetic qualities of the sliced canvases grouped around it solicited the viewer's movement.

By repurposing paintings and applied arts, Crowner changes the viewer's relationship to them. The pattern and materiality of a painting that one could walk on reappeared in the celadon tile of Wall (Terracotta Pentagon Leaves), pulled up as though by the butterfly wings to which the artist has likened the paired pentagon pattern. Hung right in the middle of this tile wall was an untitled white monochrome canvas with a frame painted pale lime green. A simple, strangely elegant pairing, the placement of a painting on a tile wall recalled the installation at *Lo Scarabeo sotto la Foglia* of its owner's modern art collection in the building's tiled interior—though here the functionality of the tile wall was of course part of Crowner's work itself—and foregrounded the relationship between work and frame, figure and ground, image plane and objecthood, painting and architecture. Rather than contribute to a total work of art, the white-tiled platform created an edge halfway into the roughly L-shaped gallery, its supporting plywood substructure blatantly visible. The painting *Sliced Black Tree* hung partly above the platform and partly above the regular gallery floor so that the viewer, instead of imagining a choreographed movement on the platform, was encouraged to choose from which level to view the sewn canvas and to think about the physical, psychological, and philosophical issues raised by this threshold.

The title "Plastic Memory," a technical term for the process by which distorted clay returns to its original shape, alluded not only to Crowner's handling of art history but also to the viewer's tactile and temporal experience of her work. With its reference to nature, the show addressed the connection between micro components and macro appearances; the repetition of patterns in art, architecture, and the natural world; and the viewer's place within these relationships. And by joining beautiful forms with rich material textures, her exhibition demonstrated an admiration for the historical avant-gardes' "cross-pollination"—in Crowner's own words—between the different arts while activating bodily movement in a way that was highly uplifting.

—Elisa Schaar