JESSICA STOCKHOLDER
Now based in Chicago, the pioneering artist and educator continues to examine the interstices between painting, sculpture and installation—and the spaces they inhabit.
By Caroline Picard

One would never suspect that Jessica Stockholder’s ivy-covered studio was originally a barn. The one-story building on the edge of the University of Chicago’s predominantly Gothic-style campus has high ceilings inside, skylights, windows and clean white walls. While it may be a far cry from those iconic red structures peppered across the Midwest, it is perfectly suited for artistic production. Given Stockholder’s ongoing dialogue with architecture—her ability to intervene and transform architectural sites into multicolored environments, it seems fitting that this unique, well-weathered spot would house her creativity. The site was originally converted to a studio in 1906 by Lorado Taft, a sculptor and professor who remains the building’s namesake. In 1965 it was designated a National Landmark and, until recently, was a main hub of the University’s MFA program, where Stockholder now teaches.

“I’ve been here for two years and I am beginning to feel settled. I like Chicago. It was hard to move; I felt like I was a plant uprooted.” Since her New York debut in the late ’80s, she has influenced a generation of artists with her site-specific installations. She has made a vibrant career “drawing in space” around the world. From the Whitney Museum of American Art to the Palacio de Cristal, from the Centre Pompidou to Art Basel, Stockholder appropriates a wide range of every day materials—like desk lamps, freezers, or bathtub bottoms—arranging them in space as she composing on a canvas.
She’s also enjoyed an academic career. For over a decade, until 2011, Stockholder worked as the Director and Professor of Graduate Studies in the Sculpture Department at Yale. Thereafter, she accepted a position at the University of Chicago as the Chair of the Visual Arts Department. In every aspect of her work, Stockholder responds to structure, whether considering a traditional, square canvas, the boundaries of an exhibition space, an intersection of a city, or even the administrative structure of a school.

Stockholder originated from the West Coast. Born in Seattle in 1958, she was raised in Vancouver and worked closely alongside Maynard Roaden at the University of Victoria. With a BA degree in hand, she left the mountainous landscape of British Columbia for graduate school. Although Stockholder had already begun composing sculptural interventions that addressed the space between and outside of painting, she applied and was accepted into Yale’s painting department. “I applied to the painting department because I thought of myself as a painter,” she says. After one year, and partly due to administrative practicalities, she switched over to the sculpture department, where she would later graduate.

“Lift,” Installation view
10 July – 31 August 2013, 1301PE, Los Angeles
Photo: Frederik Nilsen
Courtesy 1301PE
Mitchell-Innes & Nash

Yale contrasted greatly from the University of Victoria. "At Yale I met artists, like Judy Pfaff and Mel Bochner, whom I had heard about at UVic. It was like, 'Oh, these are real people.' Artists she'd read about in magazines walked around campus. I got there in the early '80s, when David Salle was getting a lot of attention," she says. "The art market was booming, especially for painters. (Yale) is really close to New York. But it isn't in New York. It provides a certain enclave of its own—though life there intersects what goes on in NY."

Perhaps in response to the highly commercial market that prevailed with her graduate education, perhaps in response to the panoply of landscapes she had left behind, Stockholder began making large, colorful installations in space, springing free of the flat picture plane, they resisted easy commodification while employing materials endemic to the custom. You buy toothpaste and it comes in a plastic tube, you go shopping and what are you carrying your groceries in? All the things we bring us into contact with objects we don't really need."

"The immediate success. Soon after graduating with an MFA in 1985, Stockholder was a PST scholar from 1986-1989, during which time she received an NEA grant for sculpture, and a New York Foundation for the Arts grant in painting—one again proving the novelty to incorporate multiple disciplines in multiple scales."

The list of accomplishments that follows is long, rich and ongoing. She became a Guggenheim fellow in 1990, and participated in the 47th Venice Biennale. In 1996 she returned to Yale as a professor and chair of the sculpture department, where, for the next 12 years, she simultaneously fulfilled multiple international commissions. Some more recent examples include a large, 2009 city commission in New York's Madison Square Park, "Flooded Chambers"—a piece that now resides permanently at the Locust Art Sculpture Park in St. Louis. In 2010, she transformed the Reina Sofia's Sala de Cristal, installing an immersive tower of plastics as the centerpiece for "Pawpin' the Sea." This past June, she participated in "Art Basel with Wide Eyes Smeared Here—"another work comprised of evocative materials including among other things, a swing set, a fake rock, and "a blob of red acrylic paint."

As head of the sculpture department, it might seem—on paper—that Stockholder had pronounced disciplinary alliances at last. Instead, she continued the ways in which sculpture has opened up over the last decade, so much so that the world itself desires revision. "Sculpture has become a less useful word than it used to be. What's sculpture? Who do you know carving stone and putting it on a pedestal? I mean, what's the definition of sculpture?" Consequently she engaged a broad range of multi-disciplinary student practices. "The students I work with at Yale in the Sculpture Department were making all kinds of things."

Ultimately, Mitchell-Innes & Nash looks forward to a future where art, music, dance and new media can all occupy the same space. "Our goal is to make art more accessible to everyone, to bring people to the arts and make art a part of their daily lives."

"I'd been at Yale for 12 years. I was looking out my window and thinking—well, I could stay here the rest of my life, or not. When the University of Chicago invited me to come to their MFA it was compelling. I am glad I moved."

Although the University of Chicago's MFA program is about the same size as the sculpture department, Stockholder had been overseeing previously, the programs are very different. "Here, we are too small a department to be divided into disciplines—that makes the conversation and critique we have in relation to the work different—not better or worse." Whereas the Yale School of Art is adjacent to Yale College, the MFA department Stockholder now chairs is embedded in the University's humanities division. Obviously, different departmental boundaries have an impact. "The structures we operate in teach that work in affect what we do and how we think."

The year she moved to Chicago, Stockholder worked with the Chicago Loop Alliance to wrap 76,000 square feet of colored vinyl around buildings and streets at the downtown intersection of State and Adams. Color Jam remains one of the largest Chicago public art installations. The installation was designed to highlight the aesthetic, cultural, and economic vibrancy of Chicago's Loop. It was a collaborative project involving many partners, including the City of Chicago, the Chicago Loop Alliance, and the Illinois Arts Council. The vinyl was applied to the buildings and streets in a kaleidoscope of colors, creating a vibrant and eye-catching display that attracted attention and drew visitors to the area. The project was a success, and it continues to be a popular attraction in the Chicago Loop.
"Peer Out to See," 2010
Site-specific installation at Palacio de Cristal,
Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid

commission to date. "Living here, with Color Jam on view gave
rise to some feelings of exposure—day to day—but it was also really
lovely," Stockholder admits. In this case, she did not install sculptural
elements instead she worked with an industrial sign painting com-
pany and applied a variety of colorful paints to a single, high traffic
commercial nucleus, transforming it into an immersive field of color.
Swatches of rust orange, lime green and teal blue passed through
the crosswalk, extending up the sides of buildings. They incorporated
diagonal lines that challenged the city's perpendicular grid.

"The piece engaged four different buildings, owned and occupied by differ-
et people," Stockholder says. "It was also on the street and the sidewalk,
each governed by different city codes. Each element had a different set
of codes that Stockholder had to negotiate—she had to allow business
signage to be visible, for instance, from where it might hang against a
building, just as it was necessary to use a particular kind of red on the
street, in accordance with the city. Stockholder navigated a different set
of regulations prescribed by each site. "The Chicago Loop Alliance is a
civic organization, funded by the people who work and own buildings
in the loop," she explains. "Because the C.L.A. is so well connected to
all levels of government they were able to make the work happen."

The intersection at Adams and State became an abstract painting.
Its various, permanent, architectural features—newspaper dispensers,
streetlights, gum spots and even buildings—functioned like the
objects Stockholder usually installs in museum galleries. Pedestrians,
taxicabs, and buses also made their way into this colorful sphere,
becoming—temporarily—sculptural elements. Except from a high floor
of a skyscraper, the entire tableau is impossible to see at once.
"The birds eye view was very different than being on the ground." Being on the street, one was immersed in a colorful environment
uncharacteristic of a big city intersection. When asked if it was diffi-
cult to conceive of such a large scale she laugh, "It was much easier
to think, OK let's put some colors over these buildings then it was to
actually put the color on the buildings!"

Even in her more intimate works, the same principles apply. "All sys-
tems of communication are abstract. The direct experience of things
is direct experience." Her current show "LIFT," at 1301PE Gallery in
Los Angeles, seems a good example of this. It regularly incorporates
physical ladders, or lifts, and then composes abstract forms, or ang-
gled lines off of walls or on paper that mimic ladders. The courtyard
holds a massive God's Eye—one of those yarn and Popsicle stick
structures often composed at summer camp. The piece is elevated
dramatically through a large scissor lift. The mechanical crosshatch
of the blue and gray lift resonates with the yarn's wrapping, behind
which a small green tree makes an almost accidental appearance at
its post beside the front door. A thick blue diagonal stripe stretches
up on the building's facade, and continues, behind the God's Eye, up
to the roofline. Horizontal second-story windows frame a long, pink
stripe, intersecting the blue line. Shadows cast by the second story's
overhang add another dimension, as does the grid pattern on the
courtyard floor and the adjacent, angled awning.

Work inside 1301PE responds to that outdoor fixture. The first floor
contains one small, single work, Related, composed of fur, plastic,
wood fiber blocks, granite and acrylic paint. In a room on the second
floor, two drawings hang in frames. Zee, an adjacent sculpture with
a green light bulb, stands kitty-corner to the drawings; its diagonal
boards of wood echo the rise and run of ladders, as bright green
cords loop like pencil marks on the floor. The last room contains three
discrete ladder sculptures. Here, the viewer looks out onto the court-
yard through the back of the God's Eye. Stockholder's ladders have been
modified in different ways. All of them reach up to the wall in some
way, so they draw the eye up, as the scissor lift elevates the
God's Eye.

Each iteration of a particular motif facilitates a direct experience. Just
as, one might argue, adding large patches of unusual color to an inter-
section, would remind pedestrians about the abstract physical space
they are so accustomed to. "We have categories of abstract art that
are distinct from representational art, but you don't have to push very
hard to find that the categories collapse a little," she sits at her studio
table with a mug of green tea clasped between her hands. It is not
as hot as one might expect for a July day, and open windows wel-
come a cross draft. "There are really great paintings of oranges and
not-so-great paintings of oranges—the formal, abstract qualities of a
work intersecting how the oranges are represented has everything to
do with whether or not the painting is good. It's not possible to make
meaningful things without engaging abstraction."

Perhaps that's why Stockholder does not center on one specific disci-
pline, or one set of materials. "At some juncture, I could work with
anything. If you gave me five things to work with and that's all I had—well,
I can work with anything," she smiles. "On the other hand, the partic-
ular qualities of the materials I chose have everything to do with what
the work means and how it functions." Her material concerns
are bound to the objects that interact with everyday life. Stockholder
manages to draw those vernacular things out of their conventional
contexts, and in so doing highlight both the formal traits they possess
and the networks they were produced by. "I work with material that's
around, and in the process I notice and take stock of what our mate-
rial landscape is; a lot of inexpensive plastic things happen to be part of
it," And yet, for all their artifice, she does not see these manufac-
tured materials as necessarily being distinct from a separate natural
environment, or from humanity. "We and all materials are natural," she
explains. "That we love to make things—plastics, electricity, and
oil included—is part of our nature."