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Sarah Braman: Personal Can Be Revolutionary

BY CODY DELISTRATY | MARCH 22, 2019



An installation view of Sarah Braman's current exhibition, "Growth," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York. (Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.)

The sculptor and painter Sarah Braman creates abstract artworks from Minimalist, no-frills materials like bits of furniture and plywood. She is perhaps best known for her sculptures that, like those of John Chamberlain, fuse scrapyard metal from cars; but she also spray paints many of her objects and sculptures, creating a Rothko-esque feeling of color-field painting upon her sculptural medium.

On view through April 6 at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, her current exhibition, “Growth,” includes many of these kinds of works; but, more widely, her artistic practice is philosophical, evocative of quotidian pleasures. Her car sculptures are redolent of road trips; her works with furniture bring to mind being cozied in a living room. Braman’s most pressing interest, as she told *Modern Painters*, however, is light, the concept of which informs everything she creates. “It’s hard for me to talk about color without also talking about light,” she said, adding that many of the artists to whom she most looks up, “felt that painting the way that light fell onto the earth was a way to describe the spiritual.”

In correspondence with *Modern Painters*, Braman, who predominately lives and works in Amherst, Massachusetts, discussed the meaning of abstract art, the ways in which she learned of color and light from her mother, and why, ultimately, she’s “driven more by urges than ideas.”

You’ve said that abstract art is “always about something.” What do you mean by this? Is that true of all art or only the abstract?

My guess is that all art is about something. To me, abstraction is essential to expressing things that are beyond language. That feeling of being challenged to lean into what is unknowable or indescribable is exhilarating.

Is art always, in some form, political?

I was just looking at photos of the “Degenerate Art Exhibition” and was reminded that the oppressors definitely believe that art has the potential for potent social and political impact. Considering that much of the art in that show wasn’t necessarily made with the intent of being anti-fascist, to

me, it points to a truth that creating artwork from one's own life experience can be a revolutionary act.

You've also said your influences are Rothko, Kelly, and Gordon Matta-Clark, among other color-interested, Abstract Minimalists. How do you feel, especially as a woman, you're adding to or questioning the legacy of abstract art?

It's hard for me to talk about color without also talking about light. To me, Rothko, Kelly, and Matta-Clark — especially Rothko and Matta-Clark — can be linked to the Luminists. Many of these artists — all landscape painters in the mid-1800s, including George Inness — felt that painting the way that light fell onto the earth was a way to describe the spiritual.

In terms of color, I go straight to Odilon Redon. He worked only in black, white, gray until he was in his late 40s. I experience in his work a surrender to color. To me, it feels like he was a medium that had developed a strength to handle the transformative power of color. I recently had the privilege of visiting Joan Snyder in her studio. Her colors have a similar feel, not simply applied or conjured up by the artist. With her, I get the feeling that color is allowed in on its own terms. Rita Ackerman is another painter whose color feels bled into the paintings. There's a sense that her colors are choosing themselves, so much so that they could even be in conflict with what the artist might prefer. And then there is Xylor Jane, whose use of color is, to me, one of the most thorough, expansive, and ecstatic of any living artist.

In the end, the most powerful inspiration and instruction on light, form, and color has come from my mother who, as a single parent, built the house that we grew up in the early 1970s. Built from salvaged lumber and windows, she made us a house that looked right into the deep forest we

grew up in. In early summer, the view out of certain windows was an undulating and unspeakably lush green of backlit leaves. I experienced this house as a living sculpture, one that was in fact still being worked on when I moved out as a young adult. Unburdened by perfection, my mother built this house out of necessity. It was built with joy, skill, inventiveness and desire.

To loop back to your question, I think it would be this experience — the experience of watching this house be built and growing up in it with the woman that built it as a mother and role model — I think it is this experience that I hope to bring with me into the legacy of abstract art.

How would you define your practice — what are the overarching themes and ideas to which you’ve been drawn?

I am definitely driven more by urges than ideas. I love the physicality of making art, of being in the act of building something. I absolutely love the experience of discovering a piece, of not knowing who or what the piece will be and slowly feeling its force and allowing for it. I tend to avoid calculation. I prefer the screwy divining rod over academic accords. At the root of what I do is an urge to connect to my own humanity and through this hopefully connect with others.

What do you hope people take from “Growth”?

I hope this work can bring people to a place beyond language, but one that they can relate to on an intuitive level to the experiences of their own life.

What’s next?

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I am really excited to be working on large outdoor sculptures made from concrete drainage culverts and colored glass.