

SARAH FAUX

Sarah Faux: Reconstructing Feminine Bodies with Internal Logic, Artshard, 22 January 2021



Installation view of Perfect for Her at Capsule Shanghai, 2020. Image courtesy of Capsule Shanghai.

Artshard (A): Compared to your last solo exhibition *Pucker* at Capsule Shanghai, the works presented in the current iteration take on unconventional formats - cropped canvas and monotype prints. How have you arrived at adopting these forms for your painting practice? What are the features of the format and medium that allow you to better deliver your continuous discovery of the female body and intimate experiences? And what are your thoughts on making works that challenges the “bound canvas”?

Sarah Faux (SF): My last solo show at Capsule was entirely stretched paintings, but this show is a special one for me, as it highlights less-shown parts of my practice. I’ve been making cut-out collages alongside my paintings for about 8 years, so I wanted to let them take up a bit more space! The cut-outs isolate forms from within my paintings and abstract them into these irregular, free-floating objects. In a stretched painting there’s an overall illusion of space, but in a cut-out the body lives within the space of the wall, so the gallery itself is activated. These collages aren’t intended as a challenge to canvases, but rather a different way of experiencing the abstract nature of sensory, physical experience. These figures are twisting and contorting themselves into a

hieroglyphic-like shapes, like a body trying to find a new form. And in the monotypes I’m able to pick up on that, incorporating elements of collage in the process. My prints are fast, improvised, exploratory works. This show is very personal in that way, both mediums are super direct, where the making is the thinking.

A: The piece *Bluet* draws references to writer, poet Maggie Nelson’s eponymous collection of poems and proses, which in some ways may also remind the viewer of Joan Mitchell’s work. Do all of your works make literary or art historical references? What inspires you to paint? In general, what is your artistic process?

SF: I referenced *Bluets* because that book has influenced me hugely. Nelson combines literary, historical, scientific and personal accounts of the color blue in such a fluid way that when I read it I was like “That’s it! That’s how complex a color is!”. While my own work is consistently visual, inevitably layer upon layer of references get embedded in the making - fictional scenarios, paintings I’ve seen, drawings from life and personal memories. I usually start by drawing people I’m close to in person, then

I'll mine those drawings to come up with less literal compositions. The part where my unconscious mind gets most excited is definitely with color. Colors shift and change relative to what they're next to, and in that way feel extremely related to personal psychology. We change and respond to on our surroundings too. We desire things that others desire. Colors become characters in my works that dominate above and beyond any image-content, like the blue of the torso in the piece I called *Bluet*.

A: The works shown in this exhibition, like many of your previous works on canvas, take on the first-person perspective. It is the feminine perspective we have seen in works by Joan Semmel and Luchita Hurtado, among other. While their practices challenged the male gaze of the female body in an earlier feminist movement in the art world, their "closer-to-life" renditions are assertive voices that aimed at making seismic impacts on people's conception of the female body. Your abstract approach however, invites the viewer to peruse through the painted surface, so one may find resonance with one's own experiences in an intimate situation. How have you discovered the approach of adopting personal experience as the conceptual framework of your practice? And how do you think this approach reflect on the current concerns of being a woman in the art world? In your view, how is the current generation of female artists different from the previous generation?

SF: You mention that abstraction invites the viewer to peruse, I'd say my approach invites the viewer to participate, as they construct some kind of image in their mind's eye. I'm definitely building on an earlier feminist approach of thrusting someone into a female body, but through abstraction that becomes a really fluid, active way of looking. My work is concerned with what it feels like to live in a body on sensory level, particularly but not exclusively a feminized body. Because of the trailblazing of artists from earlier generations like Hurtado and Semmel, I have less to prove. I don't have to make sweeping statements on "the male gaze". I can show feminized bodies in greater complexity, not exclusively as products of gender. My paintings embody all kinds of feelings: enjoyment in objectification, full-on hedonism, introverted depression, connectedness or alienation, gender-bending and also non-binary bodies... there's a lot of freedom now.

A: Following the previous question, the title of the show "Perfect for her" sounds like that L'Oreal

commercial, "You deserve it", or many products commercials targeted to woman. Is it fair to assume that you have embedded the capitalist (masculine) voice as an assumption or a bait that lures the viewer into a group of artworks where the visual reception differs from their expectations?

SF: Yes, I don't think of the voice as masculine per se, but I think of it as capitalist and a bit tongue in cheek. Perfect for her is like a snippet of external advertising speech, but the feminine bodies in my show are blown-open then reconstructed with very internal logic. And the viewing is extremely internal as well, as each viewer sees differently. People approach the color, material, emotion and image in my work in different orders, and often even see different configurations of bodies or scenes.

A: Between the Metoo movement and the recent global pandemic, especially that the latter abruptly shortened your artist-in-residency program in shanghai, what were your expectations of presenting this body of works to a foreign audience before the opening, and what kind of feedbacks have you received once the show opened?

SF: I was in Shanghai in January, and had to leave the Swatch residency program unexpectedly due to COVID. I was planning to make the work there and be in China when my show opened, but I ended up back in New York instead. Having shown at Capsule before, I've always loved the responses I've gotten from a Chinese audience. Women have confessed stories about ex-lovers quietly to me in the gallery, as they were injecting my paintings with their own sense-memories. But those kind of raw responses pretty much only happen in person! Instead I'm hearing things over WeChat. One of my favorite responses was from a friend who said that as she walked through the gallery, she felt like she was floating