

TÊTE À TÊTE

SARAH CROWNER
AND PAULINA OLOWSKA



PAULINA: Your work, as I see it, is very much about the process of painting. So a question that it seems to return to is: How do you start a work? How do you finish it? How do you move from one painting to the next?

SARAH: The thing is that I work on a lot of these paintings at the same time, so I don't move from one work to the next—the process is more circular, less linear. I start each work with a basic structure, like stripes or a grid, or a diamond pattern, and then I see what needs to be done to it. I'll wipe out the parts which don't seem to work, maybe only to realize later that these are exactly the parts I want to save. In a way the process of painting dictates itself. There's a lot of losing and finding going on and many contradictions emerge. Although the grids and patterns I start with are structural and mathematical, they're never perfect. If mistakes occur I might leave them. In a way, rather than making a finished product, I prefer the paintings to be in flux. Although they are of course

"finished," there is hopefully a sense they could continue in multiple directions. It "could," I like that word.

PAULINA: I think in painting there is still so much left to be said about the idea of the mistake. It is still crucial to challenge the idea of the "masterpiece" by exposing the process of how a painting is made to the viewer. What I appreciate about your work is how you show those "mistakes," or even "clumsy" parts. They are not like statements or ironical quotes. You're not making pastiches of other paintings. Rather, for me your works are about the innocence of experimentation and the joy of painting. So, by showing the process of painting you speak about human qualities rather than about the obsolete ideal of painterly genius.

SARAH: Yes, the work should show the artist not as some kind of mastermind, but as human, fallible and full of bad points and good points. It's amazing how even today the idea of genius persists—the idea of singularity, originality.... For you, you're pulling from all sorts of sources into the work—it's more pluralistic. In the same way, I'm trying to pursue abstraction without pursuing a singular, "signature" style.

PAULINA: This is why I am interested in the work of British Pop artist Pauline Boty from the 1960s, and these early twentieth-century women Polish painters who didn't fit into their time. When I see work that has this kind of vulnerability it makes me relate.

SARAH: Of course it is not about celebrating mistakes as such or making them on purpose. It is about vulnerability, and honesty, as you put it. I do like the idea that when confronting a work of art, questions are more interesting than answers and problems and possibilities are more fascinating than solutions. This applies to making as well as viewing the work. When I look at painting I don't want everything to be spelled out for me, I rather like to see the part where things come apart or all of a sudden fall into place.

PAULINA: And this is quite radical, to show that there is a problem and not one solution. I like these contradictions: that your paintings are finished and open, self-contained and related to each other at the same time. I think this openness is quite a challenge today because the notion of taking extreme positions is so passé. In the end what interests me and what I believe a good contemporary artist is, is somebody who fills the gaps between the taste-makers. In this sense I see it as a strength in your work that it is not easy to pin down and that it raises

the question of where it belongs. But maybe this is also where our work differs, because I approach my work less as an open process but more as a task or project with an overall theme for a series of paintings. I also set myself a time limit for how long I want to spend on a body of work. There always is a structure. Still, the plan I begin with, usually goes out the window at some point because I either get bored sticking with one idea or something unexpected happens. When I did the paintings for the show "Hello to You Too" at Cabinet Gallery in London this winter, the basic structure I created for myself was that I wanted all paintings to have the same size, so that they tell one story. I also tried to focus on the theme of how close to advertising painting is.

SARAH: You used this theme and the scale of the works was identical, that's where you started. But from there you went in different directions. As a series the paintings are connected, but apart from that you took them each to different places, stylistically and in terms of content.

PAULINA: That's true. More or less from my earlier works until now, I always wanted to use painting as a means to communicate. One idea that was quite crucial for me to get across was a sense of nostalgia in relation to the strange and awkward imagery of fashion advertising in Poland in the 1960s and '70s. I think painting can be the most radical medium because, while it is so open, it also has this great power that it can derive from history. It can draw on all kinds of references from commercial imagery like advertising signs to homemade kitsch paintings, from political murals to fashion as a form of visual culture. The whole history of art is like a box from which you can pull things that interest you and deliver them to the viewer.

SARAH: A gigantic vocabulary. You're using references and connect your work to things outside of painting, while what I am trying to do is look inside it, or rather find a different approach to looking inside it. I am interested in questions of velocity and momentum. I want to see what it means to juxtapose slowly painted parts and quickly painted parts, wiped down and opaquely painted parts. And questions of texture: Can you put a smooth thin wash over a thick surface? What happens when you do that? Can you keep turning the painting upside down and reworking it all over? All these things that are inherent within paint—collapsing, standing up straight...again I try to focus on the process rather than the final product. Giorgio Agamben writes that painting is an... "elaboration of means without ends."¹ This is something I like to consider when I think about the work.

PAULINA: But what do you feel about the context of your work?

SARAH: Earlier on I used to install paintings in the outdoors like murals. For instance, I once made a large scale slick red monochrome for a rooftop on a building in this park in rural Pennsylvania. The painting was made in separate panels cut specifically for the dimensions of this rooftop where I left it for about 2 weeks. There were trails nearby. Hikers, hunters, families and other people would walk by and see this red roof. Depending on the time of day, the weather and your view of the house, the color of the red and the experience of the work would change. So the outside stimuli became part of the work and the element of chance played a huge role. So they were paintings in flux. I like to think of the small oil paintings in my studio in similar ways—as paintings in motion, dependent on their environment. For the moment these exist in my tiny studio, here, but they will say different things when they're in different spaces, in different contexts.

PAULINA: How do you feel about the scale of paintings in relation to this ideal of flux and open-ness?

SARAH: I don't like really giant paintings. They can easily become pretentious... I prefer the intimacy of small scales. So in a sense this is again about the idea of painting having a human quality, about how a person could live with a painting of this size in their home on their imperfect wall, for example, rather than having it displayed in a big museum on monumental walls. There's something very unassuming and reserved about the scale and I like that.

PAULINA: When I look at your work, I was thinking of this idea of sensual Minimalism in Blinky Palermo's painting, not a full-on but controlled way of expressing emotions through colors and shapes. I agree that small scale canvases are more suitable for bringing out this sense of caution about what abstraction could mean. When I did the show for Cabinet though, I wanted to do the opposite and really go for monumentality. There was a specific reason for it. Giant paintings can become like battle paintings, historic paintings. At the same time I tried to question it. So there was one work that was made to look a bit like an unfinished wall painting, as if the one who had painted it had just left for a cigarette break. To work with wall paintings or neon signs for me is a way of bringing the "outside," in this case a city and its history, back to the "inside" of painting.

SARAH: I guess, like you, I also relate to what I see on the streets, but not in a referential way, more in a sensual and abstract way. For example I became obsessed with those empty storefronts in New York. The changing nature of these places fascinates me. You see businesses going up and shutting down. Things are being built up and destroyed at the same time. For me this is a strong metaphor for what painting can be. It could capture the particular quality of those windows that have been washed over with soap in order to hide what's behind, where the soap leaves these gestural marks on the glass, but if you look carefully you can still see through the windows and make out the junk that's been left behind in the store.

PAULINA: The transformation and gentrification of the city is a theme that in my current work is becoming more and more important. Before I focused more on the utopian spirit in certain, maybe unrealized projects of modernism in Eastern European architecture for instance. Right now, I am much more interested in the moment of change from one system to another. In the Cabinet exhibition, I worked with graphics that are both completely contemporary and reminiscent of historic pop art, so that the past and present show up on the canvas at once. In the same way I tried to mix the aesthetics of the 'East' and 'West' on once canvas so that it speaks about how the West exoticizes the East just as the East glorifies the West.

SARAH: It's true you're bringing things together on the same level to then mix them up, not just on a canvas: you use a lot of different methods and media, from painting to installations, murals, neon sculptures, from drawings and collages to videos, performances or fashion displays. You put them all on the same plane, with no hierarchy.

PAULINA: Yes, I like the idea of playing with taste and breaking rules that seem set. I don't want to turn this into a big statement though. I simply enjoy treating painting as something that can articulate an idea but which can also become an object as part of an installation. Still, I find that I also think about installations or videos in a painterly way. I don't try to have a theory about this, I am much more interested in discovering which way a work should go and if it can open up a different approach to painting. I want to keep this openness an option for my work as long as possible. I enjoy the freedom to work in any medium, maybe in media that I don't even know of yet! At the same time, the work also remains related to the task I formulate for it. Setting such a task is a bit like speculating about where the work should go. A task forces me to figure

out new ways of working. I love to be put in situation where I am confronted with a challenge and have to explore my possibilities. What I really love and admire in art as much as in people is this sense of openness.

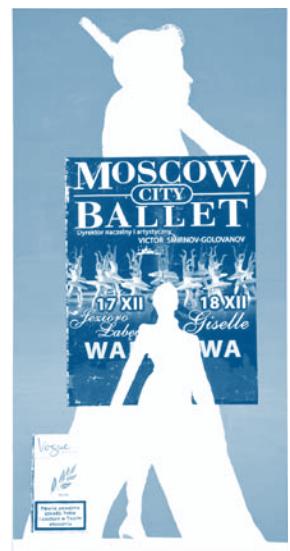
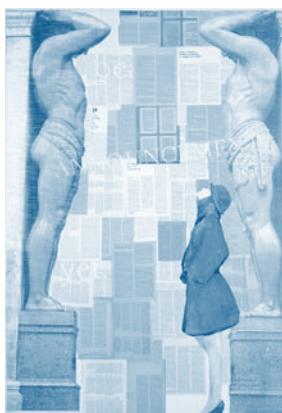
SARAH: Yes, I can see that. When I look at you and your work I get this idea that the artist may be a work in progress herself.

PAULINA: For me it's a way of not conforming to the outside. Because of this painting for me has become this place of an escape from all the rules and from the speed of communication and this obsession with newness. I think we share this sense of appreciation for painting, a love and respect for the work.

SARAH: A respect for painting as an exploration, and not an end and a love for the beauty of watching how things happen....

PAULINA: We like to say that the love may not necessarily lead to masterpieces; our work is about that admiration that permits us to dance on the roof! ■■

1 Giorgio Agamben, *Notes on Politics*, in: *Means without End*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000.



Clockwise from top left: Paulina Olowska, *Pauline Boty Acts Out One of Her Paintings For A Popular Newspaper*, 2006, 87x60 in.; Sarah Crowner, *Choreography*, 2005, 36x36 in.; Paulina Olowska, *Cigarette Brake*, 2006, 79x39 in.; Sarah Crowner, *Lattice*, 2005, 32x26 in.; Sarah Crowner (source photo); Sarah Crowner (source photo); Paulina Olowska, *Announcement Yet*, 2005, 87x60 in.