

Sadie Benning

by Lia Gangitano



If Minimal Art was a response to the implicit power relations that surrounded art production in the '60s—against which practitioners of Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Institutional Critique sought to delineate their work—Sadie Benning has analogously sought to depart from a reliance on the self-obsolcescing, corporate tools associated with video (equipment, technology, manufacturing), instead exploring the handmade through materials that maintain a longer, more independent history. Benning's at times geometric, at times figurative-leaning, work in painting and sculpture represents a parallel to visual and auditory storytelling through video and music. It posits an engagement with abstraction as a performance-based exchange, in both its production and reception.

Benning's shifting between formats and mediums queries both the structures of hyper-mediatised information and the art institutional frame. However widely screened, the circulation of Benning's early video works reflected a pre-Internet sphere of communication (in which letters, zines, and cassettes were sent in the mail), with videos distributed and shared using communal methods, belying notions of the mass consumption of media. Recent videos have shared space with objects, which, even more so, require the presence of the viewer, in one location, to apprehend moments of suspended transition.

—Lia Gangitano

Lia Gangitano Since Ellsworth Kelly died a few days ago, I was thinking about the first time we worked together. I came to Chicago to see you, in 1998, for a painting show I was doing at Thread Waxing Space called *Message to Pretty*. The piece we showed—do you consider it a drawing or a painting?

Sadie Benning I would think of it as a drawing, or comic.

LG It features a character, Ghosty Jr., overhearing comments made at Ellsworth Kelly's Guggenheim Museum retrospective. Things like—I love this—"I'm gonna kill myself, that painting breathes suicide." So much has happened since then but, in a way, the interest in these historical figures and their forms of abstraction remains consistent.

Kelly said this thing in 1996 that has often been quoted in his obituaries: "My paintings don't represent objects. They are objects themselves and fragmented perceptions of things."

SB Yeah.

LG Since that early engagement with your paintings, I understood that drawing and painting always existed alongside your video work.

SB I did a number of these comics about a ghost with a big ear who can eavesdrop on conversations and who appears in different locations—an airport, the Guggenheim. They're places where you can overhear others looking at and discussing things. At the Guggenheim, I wanted to deal with how people articulate what it is that they see when they're looking at art. Ghosty Jr. was kind of a foil for observation, for thinking about how people see things. With whatever I'm doing, that's a focus. I think it has to do with perception and understanding the complication between how people see things and how they verbalize what they see. It also has to do with identity and gender, with how complicated it is to be seen the way you feel you are. There are always these kinds of inaccurate or difficult perceptive things happening. I'm often trying to deal with some of those anxieties with the work I'm making.

LG There is also a talking back to people's relationships with hierarchies, power, institutions. The *Message to Pretty* catalogue introduction says: "A ghost with one large ear overhears the myriad clichés of awe and indigence that the exhibition elicits in its cartoon viewers. Some long for greatness, some crave its emotional and financial rewards, some want their money back." (*laughter*)

SB That's the thing: in spaces like museums, capitalism is such a part of the experience of looking. I guess that if there is some division between mediums, video involves—or did, at some point—dealing with an audience that shows up at the beginning and sits through the end of the piece. When you make an object that's hanging on the wall and you're not there, there's a different kind of relationship to the audience. At least early on, distribution of video involved such a different model, because the Internet wasn't there.

LG Right. We started working in the '80s, so the circulation of videotapes or audiocassettes was via the mail. It was more of an intimate sort of networking; we were just doing what was available. That was how networks and audiences for certain types of work were produced.

SB Yeah, back then, it felt more intimate because the objects themselves had to physically transfer from one place to another. Often I would be the person to carry them in the bag and show up with them. I'd be there for an audience when they were seeing the work, and I'd be there to talk about it afterward. It's so different from posting something on YouTube, or liking something and writing a comment. I don't want to criticize virtual space completely. There's anonymity now. You can reach more people through the Internet, but who are you reaching?

LG That makes me want to fast-forward to the show *Transitional Effects* from 2011. I experienced it at Participant on a daily basis. At the time of the Thread Waxing Space exhibition in 1998, your video work was well known. It seemed like people were going, "Who knew Sadie Benning made drawings and paintings?" Those works seemed like something you were doing as part of a personal process. Yet *Transitional Effects* was, for the most part, perceived as a painting show. That was your primary focus, but you scripted the physical space and walk-through by positioning the work and the viewer in a very particular way, with this austere space in the back of the gallery for a video work.

SB The video was all handwritten text. It had music and singing from a double record called *Old Waves*. So there was a division between reading and listening, and the other part of the show, being form and color, was a separate space without language. The paintings were about these cuts between two things, so a kind of split happens that's very similar to editing. I was thinking a lot about transitioning physically too, because I was preparing to have surgery and go on testosterone. Language was something that I felt really alienated from—there are no adequate pronouns for who I am. The text and the singing in the video were also a metaphorical or poetic way of dealing with what I think language or the spectrum of words can do.

Then the minimal "paintings," these objects being distilled down to separate parts, have a totally different perceptive feel that is not necessarily in opposition to language—I was imagining them as coexisting with the video, and was focusing on the simultaneity of these two spaces. It's true, this idea of viewers walking in one direction, having one experience with the works on the wall and then experiencing this narrative, durational piece, and then walking out—I was thinking about this physically, just like how you experience a city: you go in one direction and you see things a certain way, and then when you turn around and come back, you have a completely different read of them.

LG It seemed to me, even beyond the specific physical mapping of the show, that it had everything to do with editing. You made something like forty paintings, and then only exhibited seven.

SB (*laughter*) Yeah.

LG For me, it's second nature to look at your work in painting from the perspective of your filmmaking or video-making. It's impossible for me to isolate different parts of your practice. The paintings suggest the cut or fade, editing language.

SB What I like about dealing with an exhibition space is that editing becomes dimensional; like what's near something else suddenly creates a juxtaposition similar to the editing you have in video. When I'm working on drawings or using sound and making music, there are limitations to those mediums. They can't do certain things that a moving image with sound can do. I'm often thinking about the relationship between mediums, and how I can try to bring out what's missing in one from another. Editing—that's where the structure or the form is developed. It'd be the same if you were writing a book: what you leave out is just as important as what's in there and, in the end, the audience doesn't know what's left out. And if you're looking at a single painting, what's interesting is its aura, what's underneath; there's often layering, you know that things went on underneath the surface and that they are seeping out, in a way. When you're editing in film or video, it's happening chronologically, but in a painting, it's happening on top of itself.

LG Sometimes when I think of paintings, they're either totally inward, with everything contained within the space of the object, or they feel expansive, like they could keep going forever. Yours can go either way, but in a sense they do have an objectness that is quite one-on-one.

SB (*laughter*) Actually, in the *Transitional Effects* show and early on, I started making very immediate, direct drawings. I just needed a pencil. With video, you need all these tools—the computer, editing software—and are indebted to all these corporations in order to make your work. It was frustrating. During most of the '90s I was a stressed-out mess because I was using Hi8 and VHS and 3/4-inch and Beta—all these mediums that had a limited shelf life and don't quite exist anymore. So during that time I was often drawing or making other things in order to, not cope, but to have some other register of reality, you know?

LG Like a non self-obsolcescing tool.

SB Yeah, there was this directness that could happen with drawing and paintings, and objects or sculptures. I see all of these things as coexisting together.

LG We've talked about why one would want to make a painting. You put so much labor and time into the process of making each painting, in terms of layers and sanding. People at first are not sure if it's a painting or some sort of ceramic—

SB —or leather. People often think it's a skin or leather. Definitely the indeterminacy of the medium itself is really important to me. I want people to bring something of their own to it, to wonder what something actually is. I've been adding a lot of different materials into the paintings, like photographs or found objects, so I also want people to wonder how these materials relate to each other—this allows for an experience. With film, you have sound and you can construct this whole environment—I mean, the film can be experimental or narrative—that allows for a certain feeling to exist for someone watching the film. Narrative can accentuate that, in a way, but there's more burden on a painting to develop all these kinds of feelings or experiences in one frame.

LG But in the time-based works like *Flat is Beautiful* or *Play Pause*, which preceded the painting-oriented shows, you were bringing in flatness and drawing pretty directly. I remember talking with you about *Flat is Beautiful*, where the characters' drawn face masks were really about reducing the emoting of the actors.

SB I wanted to freeze the face and not give it an animated quality, because I don't really like animation. That's the weird thing with *Play Pause* too. People call it an animation, but there is nothing animated in it. It's all still drawings or like a very slow skateboard dolly that I made.

LG Right. Both of those works aren't behaving as animations or animated images. They're kind of hybrid—

SB Misbehaving. (*laughter*)

LG They're not conforming to the expectations of what a moving image or live action should be. They insist that viewers just accept the form that you invented for your after-school special. (*laughter*)

SB Yeah, exactly. But there's restraint too. I want feeling to exist somewhere in the work, but I don't want to dictate what the emotion should be. I want there to be an openness to how people perceive things such as an object's materiality or content that has to do with identity.

LG Right. You want them to wonder how a hand-drawn face mask can supply a really sexy blowjob.

SB That too. (*laughter*)

LG It's like, Wow, this is the dirtiest after-school special I've ever seen!

SB Thank you.

LG I remember that when you were editing *Transitional Effects* you spent a lot of time talking to other people. That was part of the process. Even with a *supposedly* solitary medium such as painting, you were in dialogue with a lot of people, and with some precursors like Robert Morris, for instance. I appreciate that this messes with the idea of painting as a non-collaborative art form.

SB Weirdly, when I would do video, I felt way more isolated because I was a zombie in front of the computer, even though shooting can be collaborative, since you need people to hold lights or whatever. Still, I was often doing a lot of things by myself. So when I started painting and drawing so much—that has become what I'm doing more—it coincided with moving to New York, with the proximity of living in the city and being around so many interesting people. Prior to that, I was living in Chicago and I did feel more hermitlike. Now I do spend a lot of time alone, but I also spend a lot of time around other artists. Even *Play Pause* was a collaborative conversation with Solveig Nelson. Our dialogue went into constructing what that video would be. As much as I am alone, it's important to me to be connected to people. It's really the whole reason that I started making videos as a teenager—I wanted to have an excuse to talk to people. Otherwise life is very lonely. (*laughter*)

But I was gonna say, in relation to what you're talking about—the kind of work in the *Transitional Effects* show, and the work that I'm continuing to do, it has an assembly-line process to it, this fabricated feel. I was interested in Minimalist artists who fabricated things, but I didn't want to outsource things. I wanted to figure out how I could actually fabricate my own work. I have a weird personal relationship to that. My mom was really into sewing and was constantly making these patterns with which to then make multiples. You could make three of the same clothes with different color fabric or whatever. When I was making videos, there was also this kind of duplication system; you could make dubs of something.

LG The paintings do have a sense of a pattern; even if there isn't a template, you could imagine that one might exist.

SB Yeah. *Template* is a good word because when I'm using sequencers and samplers and things like that to make music, which is also a huge part of my daily experience, it's about setting parameters or limits and then working within them or trying to stretch them. I think I bring some of the experience of recording music to this structure of the assembly line a little bit.

LG I just flashed on the Wexner Center show from 2007, *Suspended Animation*, and your installation of the giant characters. They were pretty large, right?

SB The heads, yeah! That reminds me—I remember showing some of the PixelVision videos in the early '90s—I think it was somewhere in Germany. You know, my face is in these videos, and it was projected about fifty feet high and wide. Then I get up there and I'm this tiny person. And I was like, "I apologize for how small I really am!" 'Cause I'm short! You can project video at all different scales and sizes, and that was something I wanted to explore when I was starting to draw and to paint, in terms of ideas. Because I don't want to just make something large for no reason, it has to make sense within the construct of the piece.

LG In your recent and upcoming exhibitions, it does seem like the dialogue between works is more complicated, with the introduction of found objects or photographic imagery. Are they talking to each other more, or equally? It's like you want to string things together, relate them. Scale and proximity become even more important with the introduction of other elements into the paintings.

SB Yeah. The other thing is that there's going to be a physical proximity to these works—whatever they are—that's human, meaning that the people looking at them have their own bodies and will stand or sit or move around the works. What does that feel like? Each person has a very different relationship to scale, but there's also a physicality that I'm interested in conveying in the work itself. It's not just about the scale, it's also the surface, it's the content of the work, it's all of these things meeting together. So with the video, the physicality was often the noise or the grain or the aesthetic quality of the PixelVision camera, which was like a Xerox machine and had a very alive feeling—you could even hear the hum of the camera's motor. The mechanical physicality of it was gritty and visceral.

LG Right, and it can't really be projected at the same scale in which people project high-definition video.

SB No, it's like a postage stamp in the middle of it.

LG You keep blowing it up, it's like, Woah!

SB It's just like garbage. (*laughter*)

LG You don't want to confine the image, but once it gets too large, it's not what it's supposed to be anymore.

SB Having used technology over many years, I started to think about that a lot. As things progress technologically, you have this loss in relationship to the material—you can't really reproduce it or you can't see it anymore the way it was. That happens for so many artists. I don't know, with object-making, the thing—I mean, it can deteriorate too—but it has a different set of problems that I feel more comfortable with, to some degree.

LG Like storage.

SB (*laughter*) Yeah.

LG And so what's happening in the studio now?

SB I'm working on a show now called *Green God*. I'm still putting language to it. To some degree, it's about contradiction, especially in relation to religion and capitalism. I'm thinking about the color green as being paradoxical in its associations, because it makes you think of nature, like gentle plant life, but also of envy or greed or jealousy or—

LG —money.

SB —or money. And the word *God* is right there on our currency. I've been thinking about how representations of God are kind of limited. (*laughter*) I'm imagining all the different possibilities for what an idol or deity or god could be, because if we're all made in God's likeness, or if man is, then where does that leave transgender people or women or people of color? So I'm wanting to fabricate a fantasy of God.

LG That's a tall order. It's interesting to me—the whole indeterminate medium question and how it always seems like we want to find the autobiographical. You were talking about how at certain times you made what would be perceived as abstraction, but you were insisting that it wasn't. People don't expect content or information from abstraction, but there's a whole generation of people who are taking abstraction back.

SB Yeah, I now look back on things that I made many years ago from the vantage point of being older. I might have thought about them differently back then. My early videos often had a sort of autobiographical or confessional discourse around them.

LG I forgot about that word: *confessional*.

SB Yeah, the confessional. When I have the perspective to look at it, of course there are those elements; there's something true about that mode. Yet there are also ways in which my identity was completely performed and constructed in those videos, because I was learning what identity was, and what it could be.

LG Like it was modular; there was a scrappiness to it.

SB Yeah, like scraps. A lot of the cut-outs that I'm doing now, I don't see them as so unrelated.

LG That makes sense to me. Whatever your chosen format is—whether drawing, painting, text, music—there is the sense that you are looking closely at something.

SB I was trying to tie back into what you were saying about taking abstraction back or rearticulating it, or trying to interact with what it means to be abstract as a person. Even if you tried to make something that was about yourself, you don't really understand yourself. Identity is incredibly abstract. I mean, our deepest drives are basically unknown to us ... we're a little blind actually. (*laughter*)

LG I think we used the term *irresolute* when we were trying to describe the relationship to this form or formlessness. It's a figuring out, right?

SB Maybe because of the way in which I'm coming to making these objects, not having been trained as a painter, I just don't worry so much about whether I should or shouldn't be putting certain things together. If anything, I often think about what might be embarrassing. Like singing, you know? That's embarrassing. Or putting a photograph into a painting, it just seems like a bad idea. Like, Don't do that, that's ugly! And then I want to do it. It's like wanting to touch fire. You want to try the thing out and understand it. Same with animation, I'm irritated by it. But then I'm really drawn to it somehow.

LG Right, you even say that in the *Transitional Effects* press release. Wait, I gotta find it now.

SB Glad I'm still saying the same thing years later.

LG Oh, it's here: "Often inspired by things that bother me." That's so funny. We have a third, silent partner in this interview who wants to say something.

Jordan Strafer I like what you were saying about doing something embarrassing. People respond really well to things that feel embarrassing to the artist.

SB Yeah, empathy is built there maybe. You feel for them.

JS It might be invisible, that thing, but if you feel embarrassed by it, it's probably good.

SB I do try to take risks. If you're going to deal with something embarrassing, you possibly have something to lose. From the get-go, I was starting to make videos out of being a queer teenager in the mid- to late '80s, and so much loss was part of my own personal life, as well as my family's and friends'. Being queer felt potentially dangerous in the world also.

LG Life-threatening.

SB Yeah, exactly. And AIDS touched all people, not just queer people. So anyway, I think of risk, of how we risk things as people. Being at risk is still propelling me. I don't know, maybe you don't end risk until you yourself are no longer alive. It's part of living.

LG Right. And you can't un-experience having lived in that time. Generationally that is our art world, our world. That is what we grew up into and there's no exterior/interior choice—it just was. So I think it's important to place yourself as a person who's never going to be without that life experience.

SB Which, Lia, is why I love you so much. I know we're not supposed to talk shop, but you give yourself over to what you do in such an incredible way. I see the risk of that, too—of the work that you do and the work you support.

LG We don't know any other way.

SB True, we're basically just—

LG —products of our time.

SB Damaged and doing the best we can. (*laughter*)

LG Curator of the damned.

SB Archivist of the damned. Running out of storage space. (*laughter*) All right, we better stop before we say the wrong thing.