

frieze

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By Kristin M. Jones



Sadie Benning *Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea*, 2005, medite 2, spray-paint, dowls and plaster

Like a pop song that keeps taking off in surprising directions, Sadie Benning's work suggests a constant slippage between abstraction and representation, sound and image, motion and stillness, colour and its absence. Benning will always be known for the intimate, richly textured Pixelvision videos she began making as a teenager, but she has long drawn and painted. She has also used objects in her videos to formal and expressive ends, such as the dolls in *Jollies* (1990) and the paper masks in *Flat is Beautiful* (1998). More recently, Benning has been creating installations that incorporate object-based art work along with video and sound. For the two-channel video installation *Play Pause* (2001–06), for example, she animated hundreds of black and white gouache drawings depicting figures, abstract patterns and urban scenes, occasionally using colour filters.

So it shouldn't be surprising that the title of Benning's show at Participant Inc., 'Transitional Effects', alluded to film editing techniques such as wipes, fades and cuts, and that the seven small-scale paintings that were on view, which at first glance seem to be modest abstractions, represent a moment of instability, suspension and potentially dramatic transformation. They especially evoke the wipe, a crude effect in which one scene seems to sweep the other away as the boundary between them moves across the screen. Each two-colour painting is a square or rectangle formed from a pair of adjoining monochrome panels made of dowels and sanded and spray-painted modelling compound or plaster. It's unclear, however, which hue would obliterate the other, which identity would take over, if the transition hadn't been paused, as if on a video screen.

Benning's work is rife with such ambiguities. Her palette has a mass-produced look – a punchy comic-book matter-of-factness – that contrasts with the slightly lumpy, hand-modelled panels. In *Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea* (2005), a diagonal break separates a black panel from a smaller Silly Putty–pink triangular one. And in *Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red* (2011), a misshapen zingy cherry-red rectangle and the larger sky-blue panel it juts into echo the colours of a superhero costume, though the mood is uncertain, mournful or deadpan – anything but heroic. In these works, abstraction is inseparable from performance, as if the ghost of Minimalism were being summoned on a video screen. And despite the sanding, a sculptural quality remains, as if they were cast in plaster or modelled in clay.

Just as Benning, with her thoughtful sleight-of-hand, can make paintings function like videos or sculpture, she can also coax songs into acting like paintings. Here, the paintings were

accompanied by a single-channel video she shot with a vintage black and white tube camera, *Old Waves Record One / Old Waves Record Two* (2011). As a group of Benning's own songs play on the soundtrack, most of the lyrics – recalling texts in her *Pixelvision* works but unaccompanied by images – appear on the screen as graffiti-like scrawled inter-titles. At times, they reinforce the beat; at other times they underline sound effects, as in '(THUNDER & RAIN)', which flashes at the bottom of the screen, or 'BANG BANG BANG BANG ...', which scatters all over it like gunfire. 'OH HA HO OH,' she sings, and words or phrases pop up in front of you, as if from the strokes of a brush. The songs are organized into two 'records', each with an 'A side' and a 'B side', evoking an imaginary materiality.

The lyrics tell of glass ceilings, love and desire, of a group art critique, even of colours. 'CHARTREUSE IS OBTUSE / BEIGE IS NOT SAGE / BUT IT'S CLOSE TO CHAMPAGNE / IT'S SO GAY ...', part of one song goes. The mottled field on which the inter-titles appear, especially when the video screen remains blank during instrumental tracks, unsettlingly echo the spray-painted surfaces of the purportedly abstract paintings. While maintaining her low-key aesthetic, Benning constantly questions how art functions, interrupting the viewing experience as if to say, 'Hey, look there – what should we make of that?'

12/22/11

By Anne Doran



New York Sadie Benning is best known for her videos, which she began making at age 15 with a toy Fisher-Price PixelVision camera. These early works, part diary and part performance, were shot in her bedroom and chronicled her coming of age and growing up queer in Milwaukee. From the beginning, the settings for Benning's narratives have invariably been those interstitial zones—between truth and fiction, and what's in the present moment and what comes next—in which one might die of boredom, or, like the protagonists in her art, reinvent oneself in the world.

Over time, Benning has increasingly concerned herself with the potential of the generalized or reductive image to convey mood and character. Films of herself quickly gave way to films starring puppets or actors wearing masks, then to animations, and eventually, in a 2007 show at New York City's Orchard gallery, to storyboardlike drawings in which colorful geometric shapes performed lively pavaues, alternately conjuring the traffic-cam channel and porn films.

The seven minimalist paintings in Benning's latest exhibition are her most abstract works yet. Nevertheless, as suggested by the show's title, "Transitional Effects"—a term for the cuts, fades, dissolves or wipes used in film editing to join one scene or shot with the next—they also reflect Benning's ongoing preoccupation with transitional states and constructed identities.

The intimately scaled works, all done between 2005 and 2011, were unevenly distributed around Participant's cavernous main room. Made of pieces of MDF spread with joint compound, then sanded and spray-painted, each is composed of two differently colored, geometric forms pushed together to make a rectangle. With their hard-edged compositions and industrial colors, they conjure Minimal art, but a robustly noncompliant version of it—expressive, heterogeneous and a little sad-sack.

Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red (2011)—all the works are titled after the spray paint colors used to make them—a celestial blue rectangle with a rectangular bite out of its lower right-hand corner, is retrofitted with a corresponding rectangle painted in hot rose. The missing corner of the squarish, matte yellow *Wipe, Montana Gold Citrus and Rust-oleum Gloss Hunter Green* (2011) has been replaced with a small shape the color of spruce trees. And in *Wipe, Rust-oleum Gloss Regal Red and Ace Fluorescent Sun Glow Orange* (2010), a wavering sliver of shiny burgundy completes an irregular polyhedron painted in glowing vermilion.

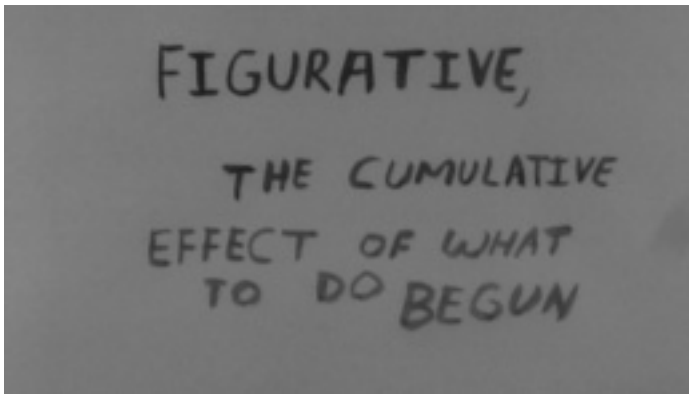
Playing on headsets in a back room was a soundtrack of mantralike pop songs, written and performed by Benning (a former member of the musical group Le Tigre), whose lyrics, handwritten in marker, flashed across the screen of a video monitor. They ranged from the catchy "A Magical" and punkish "Glass Ceilings" to more complex instrumentals such as "What Am I Supposed To Do?" In conjunction with the soundtrack, Benning's eccentrically beautiful paintings took on a double life as avatars of the lives-in-progress depicted in her past time-based and two-dimensional work.

Photo: Sadie Benning: Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red, 2011, spray-paint, plaster and mixed mediums, 13 by 15 3/8 inches; at Participant.

Jigsaw Paintings: Sadie Benning at Participant

by Faye Hirsch 10/05/11

In "Transitional Effects," at New York's Participant, Inc., Sadie Benning resists the market-fueled craze for overhung exhibitions. She has culled just seven small abstract paintings from what she says is a trove of 48, mainly produced this past year, "outdoors," in upstate New York. (She teaches in the summers at Bard.) These will surprise viewers who know Benning from her videos—though, as she tells *A.i.A.*, "I drew and painted long before I had a camera." In the back room, she premieres a new video, itself a departure of sorts.



Sadie Benning, Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red, 2011. Medite 2, spray paint, dowels, and plaster. Courtesy Participant Inc.; Still courtesy Sadie Benning.;

Sparsely installed in Participant's main gallery, Benning's bicolor paintings are seemingly modest works that pack a punch. She makes them from jigsawed wood, layers of sanded plaster and joint compound, and commercial spray paint. Each consists of two parts of unequal size doweled together to form a square or rectangle. Blaring primarily fluorescent colors, they veritably glow on the walls, even as their slightly irregular contours and surface nicks invite more intimate scrutiny.

Benning speaks of the paintings in videographic terms and considers all the mediums in which she works—painting, drawing, sculpture, video and sound—as interdependent. In the bipartite structure of the paintings, she says, "I was thinking a lot about editing, and wanting kind of a pause between two things—like you get through splitting, cutting and wiping."

As a teenager making diaristic videos in her bedroom, Benning was a pioneer in a brief craze for

"Pixelvision," the murky black-and-white medium achieved with a toy video camera manufactured by Fisher-Price. She went on to create a series of works in both Pixelvision and conventional video, most between 5 and 12 minutes long, and, in 1993, at age 19, became the youngest participant up to that time in a Whitney Biennial. In 2006, she produced a 29-minute, critically acclaimed animation, *Play Pause*, using single-colored filters over black-and-white drawings. She showed *Play Pause* in a solo show at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, in 2007, along with a group of large-scale paintings of colorful, cartoonish figures—the first paintings she had ever exhibited.

These days her two-dimensional works—whether paintings or drawings—are purely abstract. "Somehow right now expressing myself in abstract ways feels more clear—especially with everything out there so disturbing politically," she tells *A.i.A.* She describes her paintings as "off and awkward and uneven"—a quality that links them inexorably to her early video style. "They're all related to the human hand—the imprecision of it. But at the same time, there's something mechanical about them. I was interested in art that looks like it's been mass-produced." She adds, "The thing about spray paint is that you have to use what you get. The colors I chose are highly synthetic looking, unnatural. The fluorescents are like neon, or something plugged-in."

Screening on a monitor in the back room is Benning's new black-and-white, single-channel video, *Old Waves Record One/Old Waves Record Two* (2011). Put on the headphones, and you'll hear a series of songs composed and performed by the artist, as selected lyrics, scrawled in uppercase letters, appear and disappear in a cloudy-looking ether on the screen. Benning is also a musician, and was one of the founding members, in 1998, of the indie girls' band Le Tigre. Her musical style is reminiscent of the deliberately amateurish riffs of late '70s and early '80s post-punk all-female bands like Delta 5, but even more stripped down. The instrumentals are a pastiche of tiny pieces of sound that Benning programs and plays on an Akai MPC-2000 sequencer. Among them are her own beats and guitar riffs, and music made by friends and relatives.

"I probably have hundreds of songs," she says, although just 26 have been selected for the piece. "Each 'record' has an A-side and a B-side. People don't think about that form anymore." In order to listen, you have to watch; Benning has no immediate plans to release the music as a CD or MP3. She calls them "records," although "what you're seeing is physically not there—like when people say, 'I love your painting' when it's a drawing, or 'I love your video' when it's a film. I'm calling it a record when it's a video."

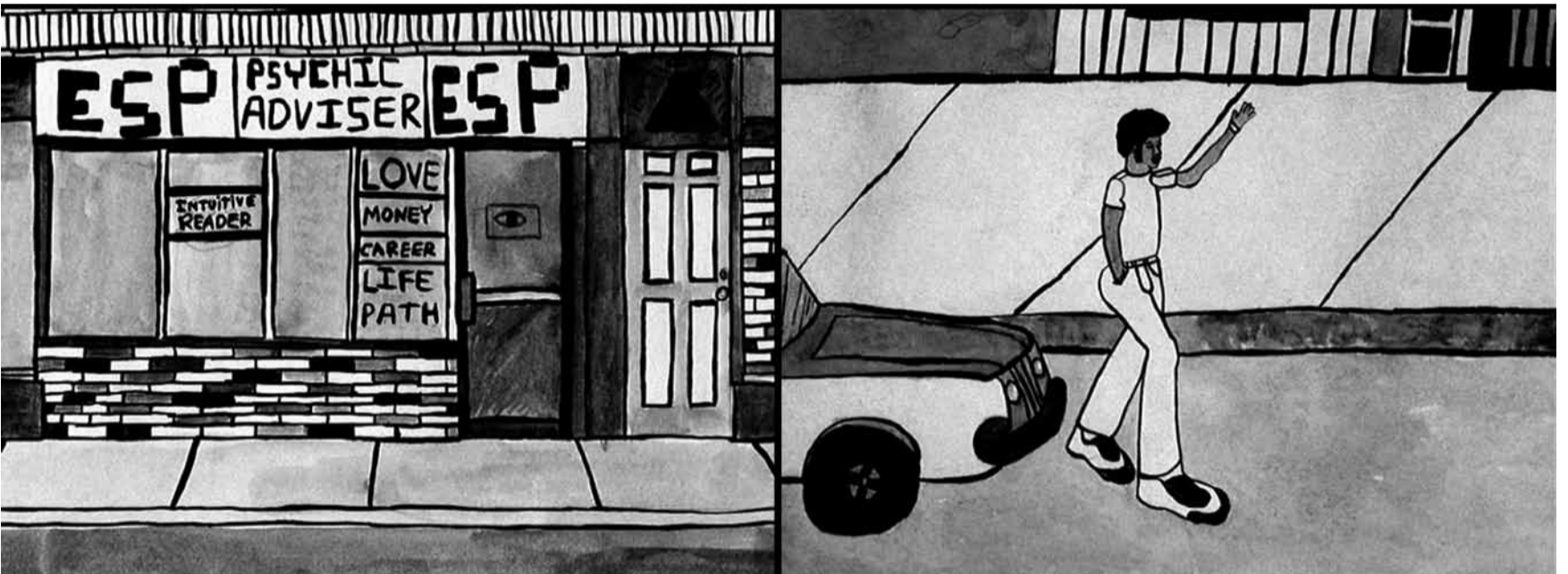
The written texts, in awkward uppercase letters, were videotaped on a copy stand at Cal Arts, where she was teaching; "They have this old analog studio, with a tube camera and four lights." Lyrics are simple, repetitive rhymes that convey quirky narratives, desires, quotidian challenges ("accidents happen but some are fake/they did it on purpose and called it a lake;" "she's got a wig in her bag/Running to work is such a drag").

The off-kilter tone is pure Benning—sometimes angry or oddly moving, and almost always funny. Followers of her video work will instantly recognize her longstanding tendency of writing texts for the camera. In *Old Waves*, stripped of ambient images, they take on new life, in song. "Pop songs are always about identity and love and frustration, longing—things that can be embarrassing, even cheesy," she says. "Singing in and of itself is always very vulnerable and human."

"Transitional Effects" is on view at Participant Inc. through Oct. 23.

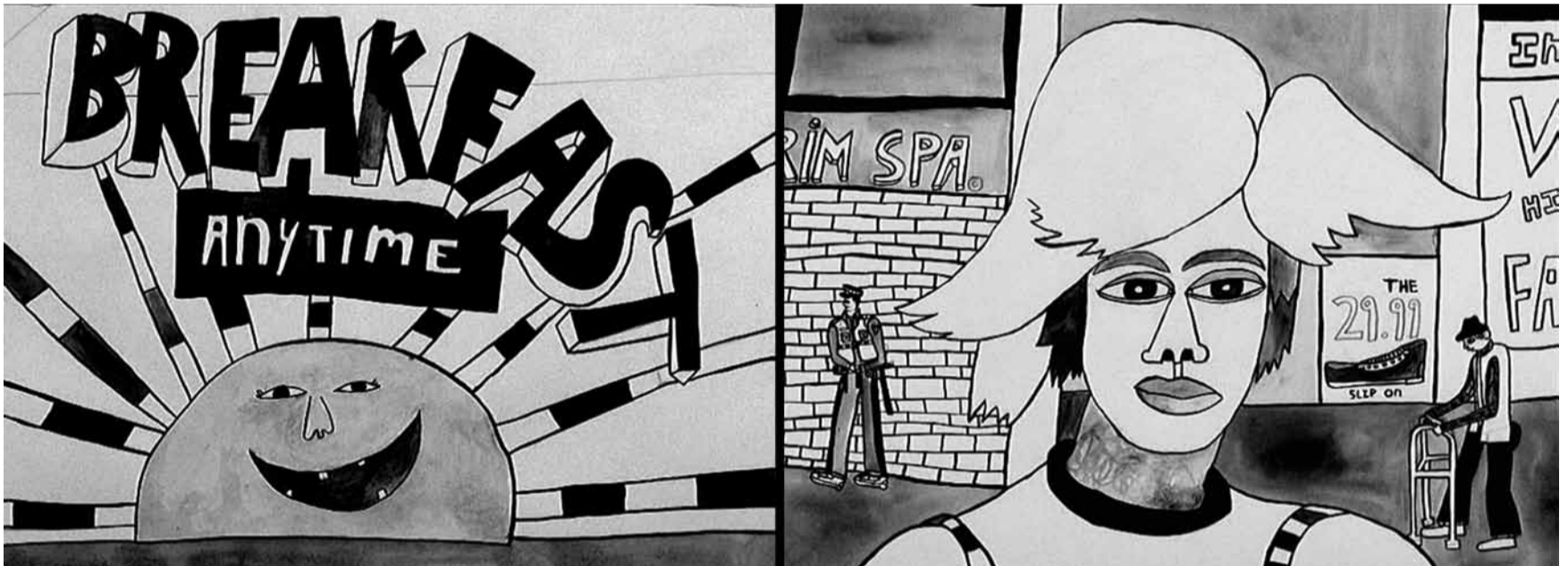


TRANSITORY STATES



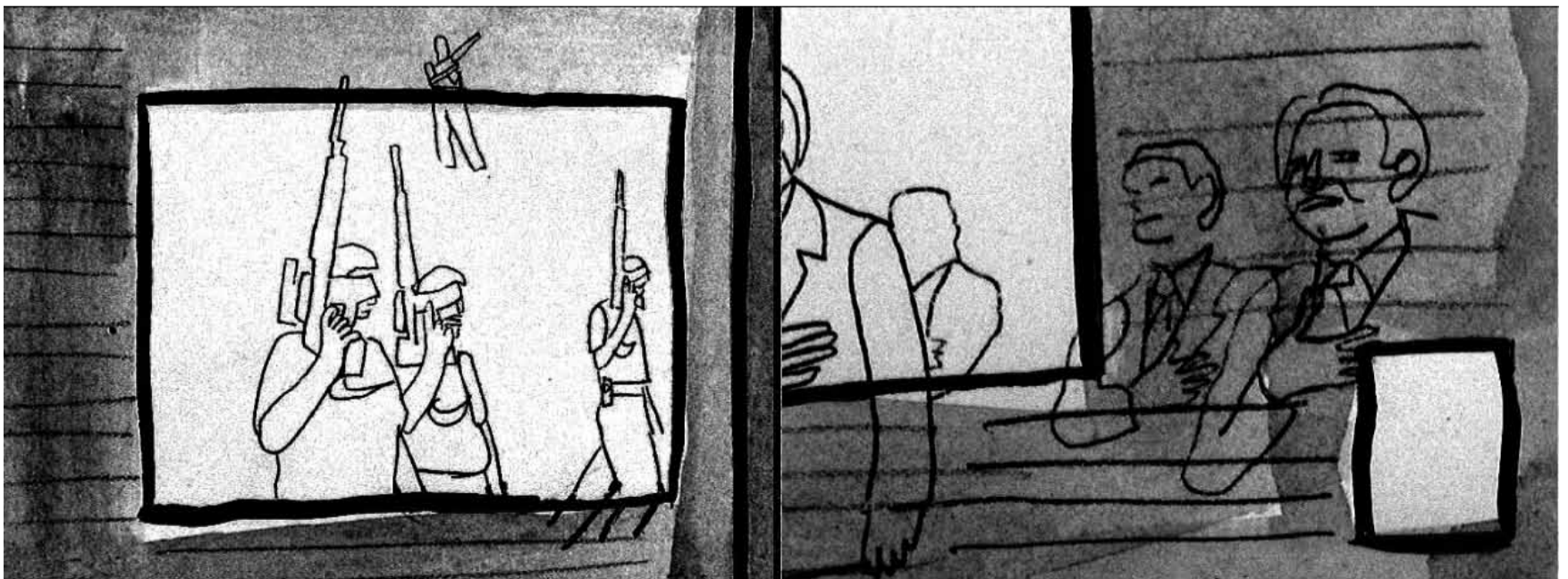
BY TINA KUKIELSKI





This page and previous – *Play Pause*
 (directed with Solveig Nelson), 2006.
 Courtesy: the artists

Opposite – Drawings from “Form of a
 Waterfall,” installation view, Orchard,
 New York, 2007. Courtesy: the artist



The story of Sadie Benning and the media she has used is the tale of her vision, approach or separation from reality. A tale of narratives developed to interpret genders and of many collaborations that brought new perspectives to her work. But it is also the story of solitary wandering with a Super8 camera, of prolific pauses in travels between one place and the next. The plot unfolds in a wide-ranging interview conducted by Tina Kukielski.

Tina Kukielski: I am really hoping that in this interview we can connect your video work of the 1990s to your recent painting. It seems to me that the video work is about your personhood. It has this very confessional style. It relies on performance and drawing and music, and it's very representational, whereas your recent painting is rather abstract.

Sadie Benning: So you're asking, how did I get from there to here?

tk: Exactly, but I'm not going to ask you that right away because I want it to unfold over the course of the conversation.

sb: OK, you've put the seed in the back of my head. It's planted.

tk: So, starting at the beginning, I know that in 1988, when you were 15, your dad gave you a PixelVision camera for Christmas – it's become so important in the folklore surrounding your work. Did it at first seem like a toy?

sb: When the camera arrived in my life, I hadn't been thinking at all about making videos. I was really interested in music and painting and drawing. So yes, the PixelVision was a toy, but at the same time it wasn't something I knew what to do with initially. But then a number of weirdly traumatic experiences happened. A friend got hit by a drunk driver and almost died on New Year's Eve. I was taking the bus home from the hospital. I got off the bus at 2 a.m. and someone starting shooting a gun in the bar on the corner. I ran home, completely freaked out. The next day I started making videos.

tk: And that first video was called *A New Year*.

sb: It was based on some of those stories, in fragments. There's a direct-address mode in it that feels confessional, and I was talking about things that were personal. But a lot of my subsequent videos were also really performative and distancing. I felt like I was acting, making something up. They're about things that aren't true, or things that are missing, and the gaps in my ability to depict something. The PixelVision camera itself has this really particular quality, like a Xerox machine, very high-contrast and grainy. What you shoot ends up looking like a comic book or a cartoon. I realized I like this medium because it isn't like any other medium. It doesn't look like video or film. It has its own built-in language. Every machine I've used since then has had some sort of built-in parameters that give it its own language. Its inherent structure, and the limitations of that structure, make it attractive to me.

tk: It seems to me like you were already thinking early on about how video could exist as a means to call out, directly address, your audience. Who at that time would have been your audience?

sb: The first five or six videos, I didn't show anyone. Now, every time I make something it

creates a way to be in contact with people and talk to them about things. I realized that if I made something and shared it, it would become a vehicle for conversation. Being queer and a teenager then, I had absolutely nothing to lose in terms of making friends or finding a community, because I had none.



tk: Maybe the fact that you didn't have a specific audience in mind allowed you to be more vulnerable.

sb: Today, I really want my audience to be as diverse as possible. A spectrum. When I was younger I was specifically interested in finding a queer community through my work, and that happened. Back then, the queer film festivals and other venues for my work were new and struggling – a community of people working together. I slowly started to feel stuck within that paradigm. So I decided to go to school at that point as a way of reevaluating, taking a step back. I was suddenly thinking about video through painting, thinking about painting through sculpture, thinking about sound through drawing. I'd also been feeling some purely technical frustration with video as a medium. Everything was always breaking. Eventually I started to shoot a lot on Super-8. With film, you're depicting the world in a much more literal way. You're getting what you see. Whereas with PixelVision you're not getting what you see, you're getting something that kind of looks like a drawing. When I started shooting with film it made me want to go back to drawing because I wanted to depict something that only "kind of" looked like what I was seeing. Also, drawing is much more direct than video. You're taking a thought in your brain and shooting it out to your hand, onto the page. The wavering of a hand-drawn line, the movement you make when you're drawing, it's like nerves. Something really bodily is happening.

tk: A lot of your early videos are related to your own rebellion and transgression.

sb: What kinds of rebellion and transgression do you see?

tk: A certain attraction to violence, or maybe the subjects of violence.

sb: It is directly related to my gender identity, and also to socioeconomic class. I grew up in a violent place. In the early 1980s, in inner-city Milwaukee there was crack, shootings, gang activity. It was not a safe place to be a kid. You couldn't play outside. So I was interested in vulnerability, and empathizing with other marginalized people.

tk: There is also a lot of humor and lightness in your work. One of the places where you really achieve that is in music.

sb: The way I looked at music in my early videos is different from how I look at it when I'm making my own music now. With the sampling in the videos, it's much more about how to place the music in relation to the narrative. Often I turn to music as a place to leave the narrative but also add some other layer so that there will be a kind of dissonance between what you're seeing and what you're hearing. So many love songs and the narratives within pop music, are very heterosexual. I was also dealing with performance and playing different gender roles in my early videos. Music helped me perform different genders, or it could imbue added layers of narrative that I couldn't do just by myself.

tk: How did the development of narrative occur in your work? As I see it, it was a kind of splintering of subjectivity that culminated in *Play Pause*. It occurs in a linear fashion: first you in the first person, and then a third person, and then a fracturing of that person so that our perspectives on the narrative are coming from very different sides and angles.

sb: It also has to do with collaborating. In a collaboration, by definition there is no single subjectivity. I've had a number of different collaborations, one with Solveig Nelson to make *Play Pause*, and then with Johanna Fateman and Kathleen Hanna as the band *Le Tigre*. There's this thing that starts to happen, an amalgamation of multiples. Whereas when I work alone I feel like I'm collaborating within myself. Today I can't make an idea happen just in video, or just in any one form. It happens in a painting, it happens in a drawing, it happens in a video, it happens in a record. That has come from having conversations with other people and building ideas outside of myself.

tk: That's an interesting answer, it makes complete sense to me. With the albums you're working on now, you do everything: You play guitar, you do the beats, you do the singing. Why did you choose *not* to collaborate?

sb: When I left *Le Tigre*, I started painting and

I was working on *Play Pause* for four or five years. It was a really long process and during that time I was also recording and making a lot of music by myself. I sometimes feel that in order to be clear about an idea, I have to be alone with it. But then in other cases, collaborating can allow for something to happen that I couldn't have made on my own at all.

tk: You spend a lot of time wandering with a camera or a recorder. How did that become a part of your work? Is it about looking for subject matter, or making field recordings?

sb: There's a real relation between inside and outside in my work. I like to spend a lot of time alone working. And I really like to be social and out in the world. In my early videos, the camera wasn't portable. There was no battery pack, so I could go out into the world, but only with an extension cord connecting me to the house. Whereas with film I could go out into the world and shoot.

tk: Wandering is essential for many artists, it's not necessarily unique to your practice, but it seems to me that your source material of late includes an exceptionally wide spectrum of people and things.

Wipe, Montana
Gold Shock Blue
Light and Ace
Fluorescent
Rocket Red,
2011. Courtesy:
the artist



sb: I can answer that in a more specific way in relation to *Play Pause*. Most of the video takes place in these transitory states: driving, taking the bus, being on the subway, moments in between places, going to or from somewhere. So it's very much about public space and being out in the world. That video, when I started making the drawings for it, was all about sex and these fantastical awkward moments when you don't know what's happening. That was very much an inside space. It shifted. I was making these very internal drawings and being inside a lot, and then September 11 happened, and the whole political climate changed. I sold my car and stopped buying gas, and decided I'd ride my bike everywhere. I started spending most of my time outside, doing things out in the world.

tk: You have described the sex drawings in *Play Pause* as being about the in-between moments, just after sex, or just before sex. And simultaneously, when they appear, there are these various colored gels and shapes moving across the screen.

sb: I think I put the abstract images with the sex because I wanted people to have the option to look at something else. I do think sexuality is hard to depict. *Play Pause* gets to the sex through dance, and a kind of nightclub feeling. So it could just be that someone is making all this up in their head while masturbating. I didn't want it to feel real. It feels stilted and strange and awkward. I think sexuality is an embarrassing thing. I feel like I need to deal with that embarrassment somehow.

tk: The geometric relationships in the small colored drawings in *Form of a Waterfall* also seem to me to be about an abstracted form of sexuality. Do you get frustrated when people constantly ask you about sexuality and gender in relation to your work?

sb: No, I think it's interesting to talk about. Although there's a lot of other things to talk about in terms of form, structure, materials, process – things that are more intellectual or conceptual and aren't just about my life story. But I also understand how these narratives of identity get infused into people's readings of artists and their work. In terms of my recent paintings, I was thinking and reading a lot about fabrication and the handmade, and these places in between where something looks like it's mass-produced but also like somebody touched it. So I was thinking less about gender or power and more about tactility and what's possible.

tk: For you, I believe, drawing is a place to escape. A real way to disconnect from a dominant, ever-present reality in order to open yourself up to

a slightly more abstract, perhaps even unconscious, realm.

sb: In some of Agnes Martin's interviews and writings about her work, she sounds like she gets into almost a trance in order to allow a vision to come to her and enable her to make her work. That could be the unconscious. It could be a lot of things. Drawing is meditative. Half the time I make drawings and give them away, and I see them later and think, wow, I honestly have no memory of making that, I was in a trance. It's the opposite when you're editing video. You can't be in a trance, because you're really conscious of all the decisions you're making. Whether you're walking around observing the world or in a spaced-out state, maybe it's about allowing an openness in your mind so that an idea can happen.

tk: You've also said you think painting is a lot about performance. Do you mean the way the audience interacts with the painting is performative, or do you mean that painting, for you, is a performance?

sb: I think it's both. In video, performance takes place over time, and if you're editing, you're planning for the viewer to sit and watch over an expanse

Wipe, Rust-
oleum Flat
Black and Rust-
oleum Hi Gloss
Harbor Blue,
2010. Courtesy:
the artist



of time, which the frames, cut next to each other, build. Whereas in a painting the idea of time is layered, on top of one another, hidden. There's a lot of mystery underneath a painting that you don't have access to. So the performativity in painting has a different kind of endpoint where you don't get to see the beginning, you just see the end.

tk: I'm thinking about the *Transitional Effects* paintings, and how important the cutaway, the slice, the wipe, is in those works. It seems like you're saying that it's in that space, in a sense, that time is embedded. For me as a viewer, it raises questions about how those two things came together. Were they once one single piece? Or were they two pieces that conjoined to be a couple?

sb: In relation to time, the paintings are about being paused or frozen. A wipe is usually just the effect that gets you from one scene to the next. You're not supposed to pause between the scenes, you're not supposed to look at that. So I'm just holding it where the cut happens. It's the in-between moment – the transition – that I am focusing attention on. I was interested in this conceptually and as a personal space. To literally embody a transition to not be either-or. So the wipe paintings are about unequal parts, about fractures and splits, about editing and rejoining.

tk: Now that you have an occasional teaching job in California, where your father lives, the two of you have been spending more time together. He's clearly a big influence on your artistic development. Do you want to say anything about the relationship between your work and your dad?

sb: There really isn't any way to put it into words, except that I feel fortunate to have a parent who understands what I do and from whom I learn so much. He's been a really radical figure in my life. He's been directly influential, and also not-there. He oscillates in a way that has affected how I make work. At this point I feel close to him as a person, and I can't separate him as an artist from him as my dad. He's just a really interesting person to know. And in terms of thinking about structure and how to put something together and how to think about duration and timing, I learn a lot from just driving with him and talking. Simply living, day to day. Talk about wandering... any kind of wanderlust I have is directly related to the time I spend with him, because we're almost always in a vehicle, moving, going somewhere, in the middle of something. And it's always different, it's never the same.

tk: It gives new meaning to the idea of the pause.

sb: That's true.

La storia di Sadie Benning e dei media che ha usato è la storia della sua visione della realtà e del suo avvicinamento o del suo distanziamento da essa. È la storia di narrative che si sviluppano interpretando i generi sessuali, e delle molte collaborazioni che hanno regalato nuove suggestioni all'artista. Ma è anche la storia di un vagabondare solitario con una Super8 in mano, o delle prolifiche pause di viaggio fra un luogo e l'altro. Una storia che si dipana nell'ampia intervista con Tina Kukielski.

DI TINA KUKIELSKI

Tina Kukielski: Con quest'intervista, mi auguro di riuscire a collegare i tuoi video degli anni Novanta ai tuoi recenti dipinti. Mi sembra che il tuo lavoro video riguardi la tua individualità. Possiede uno stile molto professionale. Si basa su performance, disegno, musica, ed è molto figurativo, mentre i tuoi recenti dipinti sono piuttosto astratti.



Sadie Benning: Quindi mi stai chiedendo come sono arrivata a questo punto?

tk: Esatto, ma non voglio chiedertelo subito, perché vorrei che si rivelasse nel corso della conversazione.

sb: Va bene, hai sepolto il seme in fondo alla mia mente. L'hai piantato.

tk: Dunque, partendo dall'inizio, so che, nel 1998, quando avevi 15 anni, tuo padre ti regalò per Natale una videocamera PixelVision che è diventata parte integrante delle leggende sul tuo lavoro. All'inizio ti sembrava un giocattolo?

sb: Quando quella videocamera entrò nella mia vita, non avevo mai pensato di realizzare dei video. Ero interessata alla musica, alla pittura e al disegno. Quindi, sì, la PixelVision era un giocattolo, ma al tempo stesso era qualcosa con cui inizialmente non sapevo cosa fare. Poi ebbi una serie di strambe esperienze traumatiche: un amico venne investito da un automobilista ubriaco e quasi morì la vigilia di Capodanno. Stavo tornando a casa in autobus dall'ospedale. Scesi dall'autobus alle due del mattino e qualcuno prese a sparare con una pistola nel bar all'angolo. Corsi a casa, fuori di me dall'agitazione. Il giorno dopo iniziai a fare video.

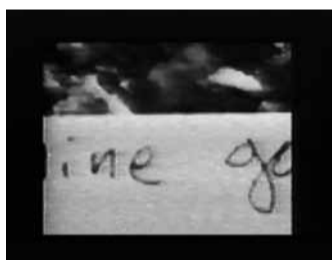
tk: E il tuo primo video s'intitolava *A New Year*.

sb: Si basava su alcune di quelle storie, frammentate. C'è un approccio diretto che sembra confessionale, e parlavo di cose personali. Molti dei miei video successivi erano invece anche molto teatrali e meno diretti. Avevo la sensazione di recitare, e allo stesso tempo d'inventare. Riguardavano sia cose non vere che cose perdute, e la mia incapacità di raffigurare qualcosa. La PixelVision di per sé ha questa qualità molto particolare, simile a una fotocopiatrice, ovvero di creare immagini con forte contrasto e sgranate. Quello che riprendi alla fine avrà l'aspetto di un fumetto o di un cartone. Mi resi conto che mi piaceva questo medium perché era diverso da qualunque altro medium. Non assomiglia al video o alla pellicola. Ha un linguaggio tutto suo. Ogni apparecchio che ho usato fin da allora aveva qualche sorta di parametro integrato che gli conferiva un linguaggio unico. La sua struttura intrinseca, e le limitazioni di quella struttura, lo rendono attraente per me.

tk: Mi pare che, agli inizi, tu stessi già pensando a come far vivere il video come veicolo per rivolgersi in modo diretto al pubblico. A quei tempi, chi era il tuo pubblico?



sb: I primi cinque o sei video non li mostrai a nessuno. Ora, ogni volta che faccio qualcosa, creo un modo per essere in contatto con la gente e parlare di cose varie. Mi resi conto che se avessi fatto qualcosa e l'avessi condiviso, sarebbe diventato un



argomento di conversazione. Ai tempi, essendo gay e adolescente, non avevo nulla da perdere in riguardo al fare amicizie o trovare una comunità, perché non ne avevo nemmeno una.



tk: Forse il fatto di non avere un pubblico specifico in mente ti permise di esporti maggiormente.



sb: Oggi voglio che il mio pubblico sia il più possibile vario. Uno spettro. Da giovane, ero con-

centrata sul trovare una comunità gay attraverso il mio lavoro, e così accadde. A quei tempi, i film festival gay e altri canali per il mio lavoro erano nuovi e faticavano a imporsi – erano una comunità di persone che collaboravano. Poi, lentamente, cominciai a sentirmi rinchiusa in quel paradigma. Così, a quel punto, decisi di andare a scuola come modo di rivalutare, facendo un passo indietro. All'improvviso mi ritrovai a pensare il video attraverso la pittura, la pittura attraverso la scultura, il suono attraverso il disegno. Stavo anche sperimentando delle frustrazioni puramente tecniche col video come medium. Ogni cosa si rompeva sempre. Alla fine iniziai a girare molto in Super 8. Con la pellicola raffiguri il mondo in modo molto più letterale. Ottieni quello che vedi. Mentre con la PixelVision non ottieni quello che vedi, ma qualcosa che assomiglia un po' a un disegno. Quando mi misi a girare in pellicola, mi venne la voglia di tornare al disegno, perché volevo rappresentare qualcosa che non assomigliasse "troppo" a ciò che vedevo. Inoltre, il disegno è molto più diretto del video. Afferrì un pensiero nella tua mente e lo cacci fuori dalla tua mano, sulla pagina. Il tremolio di una linea tracciata a mano, il movimento che fai mentre disegni, è come quello dei tuoi nervi. C'è in gioco qualcosa di molto corporeo.

tk: Molti dei tuoi primi video sono legati alla tua ribellione e trasgressione.

sb: Che tipo di ribellione e trasgressione ci vedi?

tk: Una certa attrazione per la violenza o, piuttosto, per i soggetti della violenza.

sb: È direttamente legato alla mia sessualità, nonché alla mia classe socio-economica. Sono cresciuta in un posto violento. Nei primi anni '80, nel centro di Milwaukee c'erano crack, spatarie, delinquenza delle gang. Non era un posto sicuro in cui crescere. Non potevi giocare all'aperto, così m'interessavo alla vulnerabilità e all'empatia con altra gente marginalizzata.

tk: Ci sono anche molto umorismo e leggerezza nel tuo lavoro. Uno degli ambiti dove spiccano di più è la musica.

sb: Il modo in cui consideravo la musica nei miei primi video è diverso rispetto a come la considero ora, quando la compongo. Con le campeonature nei video, è più una questione di come collocare la musica in rapporto alla narrazione. Spesso mi rivolgo alla musica come luogo dove abbandonare la narrazione, ma anche dove aggiungere qualche altra dimensione, di modo che ci sia una sorta di dissonanza tra ciò che vedi e ciò che ascolti. Tantissime canzoni d'amore, e le narrazioni inerenti alla musica pop, sono molto eterosessuali... Facevo anche performance e interpretavo identità sessuali differenti nei miei primi video. La



Above – “Transitional Effects,” exhibition view, Participant, Inc., New York, 2011. Courtesy: the artist

Bottom, right – Wipe, Rust-oleum Gloss Regal Red and Ace Fluorescent Sun Glow Orange, 2010. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite, bottom – Flat is beautiful, 1998. Courtesy: the artist and Video Data Bank

Bottom, left – Play Pause Tapes: Soundtracks for Looking and Listening, 2007. Courtesy: the artist

Opposite, top – Drawing for Play Pause, 2001-06. Courtesy: the artist

Previous page – A New Year, 1989. Courtesy: the artist and Video Data Bank



musica mi aiutava a interpretare generi sessuali diversi, o poteva infondere ulteriori dimensioni narrative che non avrei potuto esprimere da sola.

tk: Come è avvenuto lo sviluppo della narrazione nel tuo lavoro? Per come la vedo io, è stata una sorta di frantumazione della soggettività culminata in *Play Pause*. Avviene in maniera lineare: prima tu in prima persona, poi in terza persona, poi una frattura di quella persona così che i nostri punti di vista sulla narrazione vengano da lati e angoli molto diversi.

sb: C'entra anche la collaborazione. In una collaborazione, per definizione non c'è una singola soggettività. Io ho avuto una serie di collaborazioni, una con Solveig Nelson per realizzare *Play Pause*, e poi con Johanna Fateman e Kathleen Hanna come band Le Tigre. C'è qualcosa che si attiva, simile a un amalgama di molteplicità. Mentre quando lavoro da sola, mi sembra di collaborare con me stessa. Oggi non posso realizzare un'idea solo in video o in un'unica forma. Essa si esprime in un dipinto, in un disegno, in un video, in un disco. Qualcosa che avviene perché ho avuto conversazioni con altre persone e costruito idee al di fuori di me stessa.

tk: È una risposta interessante, ha perfettamente senso. Negli album a cui stai lavorando ora, fai tutto: suoni la chitarra, ti occupi della parte ritmica e vocale. Perché hai scelto di non avvalerti delle collaborazioni?

sb: Quando lasciai i Le Tigre, mi misi a dipingere ed era da quattro o cinque anni che lavoravo a *Play Pause*. Era un processo veramente lungo, e durante quel periodo stavo anche registrando e realizzando molta musica da sola. A volte sento che per avere chiarezza su un'idea, devo convivere in solitudine. Tuttavia, in altri casi, la collaborazione può permettere che accada qualcosa che non avrei mai potuto fare da sola.

tk: Trascorri molto tempo andando in giro con una macchina da presa o con un registratore. Come è divenuta parte del tuo lavoro questa pratica? Si tratta di cercare un argomento, o di fare registrazioni sul campo?

sb: C'è un vero rapporto tra l'interno e l'esterno nel mio lavoro. Mi piace trascorrere molto tempo al lavoro, da sola. E mi piace molto stare tra la gente e nel mondo. Nei miei primi video, la videocamera non era portatile. Non c'era la batteria, quindi potevo sì andare fuori nel mondo, ma solo con una prolunga che mi teneva collegata a casa mia. Mentre con la pellicola potevo andare in giro per il mondo e filmare.

tk: Girovagare è essenziale per molti artisti, e non è necessariamente una peculiarità del tuo lavoro, ma mi sembra che i tuoi ultimi oggetti d'interesse comprendano una gamma eccezionalmente ampia di persone e di cose.

sb: Posso rispondere in modo più specifico in rapporto a *Play Pause*. Gran parte del video ha luogo in questi stati transitori: guidare, prendere l'autobus, stare in metropolitana, momenti fra un luogo e l'altro, andando o venendo da qualche parte. Quindi riguardano molto lo spazio pubblico e lo stare fuori nel mondo. Quel video, quando iniziai a farne i disegni, era tutto sul sesso e quei fantastici goffi momenti in cui non sai cosa sta succedendo, e non sei neanche molto sicuro... Lì c'era per la gran parte uno spazio interno. È mutato. Facevo questi disegni molto "interni" e stavo molto al chiuso, e poi ci fu l'11 settembre e l'intero clima politico cambiò. Vendetti la mia macchina e smisi di usare benzina, e decisi che sarei andata ovunque in bicicletta. Presi a trascorrere gran parte del mio tempo all'aperto, facendo cose nel mondo esterno.

tk: Hai descritto i disegni sessuali in *Play Pause* come dei momenti intermedi, subito dopo il sesso o appena prima del sesso. E simultaneamente, quando compaiono, ci sono queste forme e gelatine variopinte che si muovono attraverso lo schermo.

sb: Credo di aver messo le immagini astratte assieme al sesso perché volevo che la gente avesse l'alternativa di guardare qualcos'altro. Trovo che la sessualità sia difficile da rappresentare, e *Play Pause* arriva al sesso attraverso il ballo e una specie di atmosfera da night club. Quindi potrebbe essere solo che qualcuno si stia immaginando tutto mentre si masturba. Non volevo che sembrasse reale. Ha qualcosa di innaturale, strano e goffo. Trovo la sessualità una cosa imbarazzante. Sento il bisogno di venire a patti con quell'imbarazzo in qualche modo.

tk: Analogamente, anche i rapporti geometrici nei piccoli disegni colorati in *Form of a Waterfall* mi sembrano l'astrazione di una forma di sessualità. Provi frustrazione quando la gente ti fa costantemente domande su sessualità e identità sessuale in rapporto al tuo lavoro?

sb: No, per me è interessante discuterne. Anche se ci sono molte altre cose di

cui parlare in termini di forma, struttura, materiali, procedura – cose che sono più intellettuali o concettuali e che non riguardano solo la storia della mia vita. Ma capisco anche che queste narrazioni identitarie s'infondono nella lettura che la gente fa degli artisti e del loro lavoro. Per quanto riguarda i miei recenti dipinti, ho letto e riflettuto molto su fabbricazione e fattura a mano, e quegli ambienti intermedi dove qualcosa sembra prodotto in serie ma anche come se qualcuno lo avesse toccato. Quindi pensavo meno all'identità sessuale o al potere e più nello specifico alla tattilità e a che cosa sia possibile.



tk: Credo che disegnare per te sia una via di fuga. Un vero e proprio modo per sconnettersi da una realtà dominante e perenne allo scopo di abbracciare un regno lievemente più astratto, forse persino inconscio.

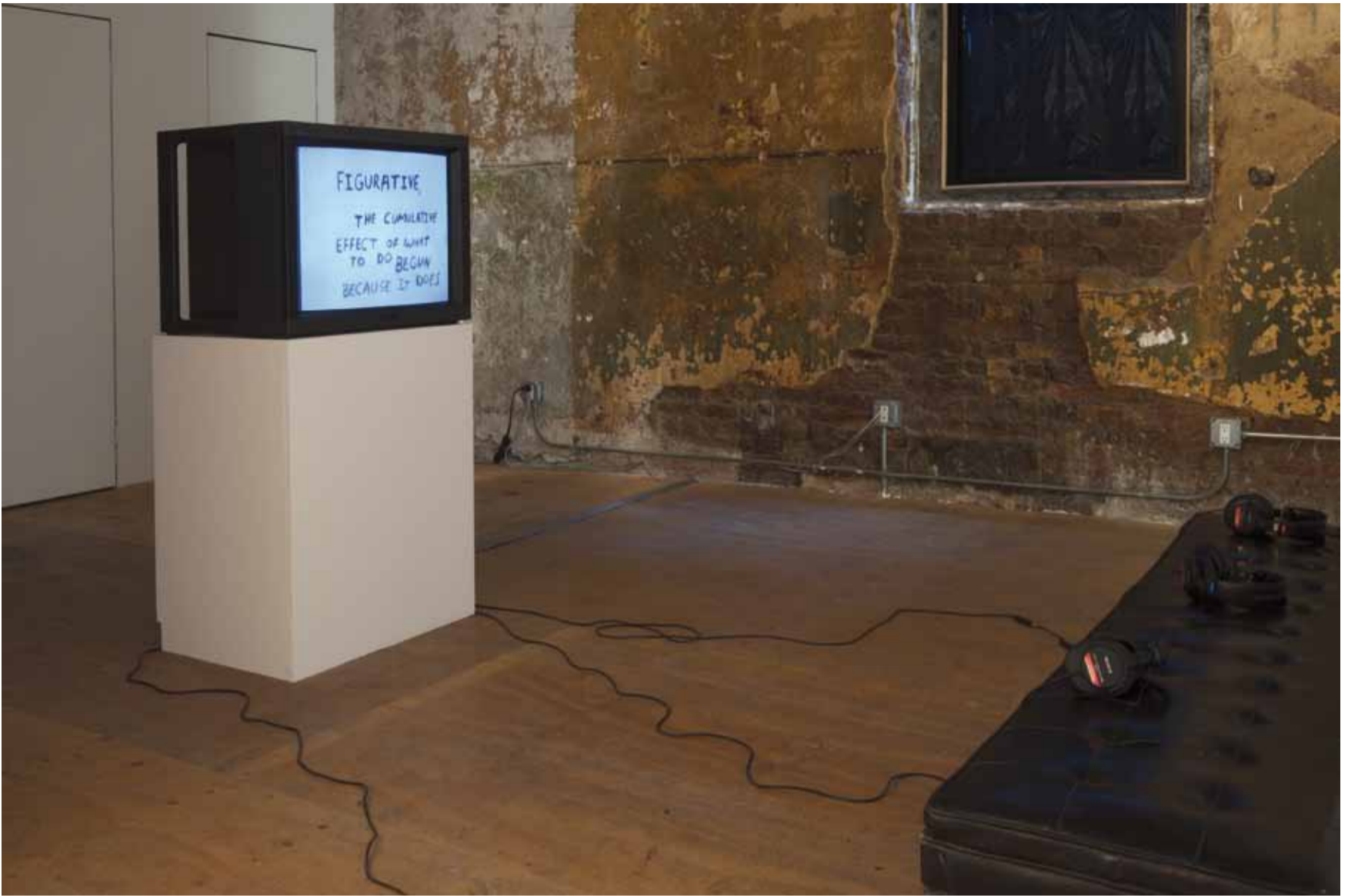
sb: In alcune delle interviste ad Agnes Martin e degli scritti sul suo lavoro, sembra che lei entri quasi in *trance* per permettere che le giunga una visione che le permetta di fare i suoi lavori. Questo potrebbe essere l'inconscio. Potrebbe essere molte cose. Disegnare è meditativo. La metà delle volte che faccio dei disegni e li do via, in seguito, quando li vedo, penso: "Wow, francamente, non ricordo proprio di averlo realizzato, ero in *trance*". Quando monti un video è il contrario. Non puoi essere in *trance*, perché sei molto consapevole di tutte le decisioni che stai prendendo. A prescindere che si vada in giro a osservare il mondo o ci si trovi in uno stato alterato, forse si tratta di facilitare un'apertura mentale che permetta all'idea di avverarsi.



tk: Hai anche detto che, secondo te, la pittura riguarda molto la performance. Intendi dire che il modo in cui lo spettatore si rapporta col dipinto è interattivo, o che per te la pittura è una performance?

sb: Entrambe le cose, credo. Nel video, la tua performance ha luogo nel tempo e, se stai montando, prevedi che lo spettatore stia seduto a guardare per un lasso di tempo dato dai fotogrammi, montati uno accanto all'altro. Mentre in un dipinto l'idea del tempo sta negli strati, messi uno sopra l'altro, nascosti. Sotto un dipinto c'è molto mistero a cui non si ha accesso. Quindi la performance nella pittura ha un diverso tipo di stadio finale dove non puoi vedere l'inizio, ma solo la fine.

tk: Sto pensando ai dipinti di *Transitional Effects*, e a quanto sia importante lo stacco, la sezione, la tendina, in quei lavori. È come se tu stessi dicendo che è in quello spazio, in un certo senso, che è incorporato il tempo. Quale spettatore, mi spinge a domandarmi come si siano incontrate quelle



Old Waves Record One / Old Waves Record Two, installation view, Participant, Inc., New York, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Participant, Inc., New York

Below – Drawings for *Play Pause*, 2001-06. Courtesy: the artist

due cose. Prima erano un lavoro unico? O due lavori che si sono congiunti in una coppia?

sb: In rapporto al tempo, beh... i dipinti sono come in pausa o congelati. Una tendina in genere è solo quell'effetto che ti conduce da una scena alla successiva. Non dovrebbe esserci una pausa tra le scene, non è una cosa da mostrare. Così io mi soffermo dove avviene lo stacco. È sul momento intermedio, sulla transizione, che concentro l'attenzione. Questa cosa

sb: Non c'è veramente altro modo di spiegarlo a parole, tranne che mi sento fortunata ad avere un genitore che capisce cosa faccio e dal quale imparo così tanto. È stata veramente una figura essenziale nella mia vita che mi ha direttamente influenzata, e che non è stata sempre presente. Oscillando tra le queste due posizioni, mio padre ha influenzato il mio modo di lavorare. Ormai mi sento legata a lui come persona e non posso separare l'artista dal padre. È veramente una persona interessantissima da conoscere. E riguardo a come pensare la struttura, a come mettere insieme qualcosa, a come concepire durata e tempo,



m'interessava concettualmente e come spazio personale. Rappresentare letteralmente una transizione nel suo non essere né questo né quello. Quindi i dipinti sono su parti diseguali, su fratture e schegge, su montaggio e ricongiunzione.

imparo molto soltanto conversando con lui mentre siamo in giro in macchina. Semplicemente vivendo, di giorno in giorno. A proposito di girovagare... Tutta la mia sete di vagabondaggio è direttamente legata al tempo che passo con lui, perché siamo quasi sempre in un veicolo, in spostamento, diretti da qualche parte, nel mezzo di qualcosa. Ed è sempre diverso, non è mai la stessa cosa.

tk: Ora che insegni occasionalmente in California, dove vive tuo padre, voi due state trascorrendo più tempo insieme. Lui è chiaramente una forte influenza sul tuo sviluppo artistico. Vorresti dire qualcosa sul rapporto tra il tuo lavoro e tuo padre?

tk: Dà un nuovo significato all'idea di pausa.

sb: È vero.

Play Pause and Rewind: Sadie Benning Returns to the Whitney

By Carolyn Kane

May 25, 2009



Image: Sadie Benning, drawing for *Play Pause*, 2001-06

Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1973, video artist and musician Sadie Benning came of age in the art world in the 1990s with well-known journalesque-video tapes, experimental exposés made on the Fisher Price Pixelvision camera that her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning, had given her. Also a former member of the band *Le Tigre*, Benning is known for her bold and brazen style. Her works have previously shown in the Whitney Biennial in 1993 and in 2000. Her current installation *Play Pause* (2006), is also now on display at the Whitney.

Play Pause is a two channel video installation that projects images of thousands of hand drawn, gouache on paper, illustrations that Benning made between 2001-2006. Most of them are drawn in black and white with a light gray wash underneath, but a few of the images are also treated with a monochrome tint of red, blue, or green. The piece runs for 29 minutes on a loop. The illustrations were all scanned and arranged in this sequence for the piece. Coupled with surround sound, they tell a story of a “day in the life,” of an anonymous protagonist. Each image appears for only a few seconds, and then another similar image appears: from the first steps on the street, the stores, advertisements, shop fronts, anonymous people, night life, dance clubs, after hours sex, television, and scenes of departure from the train station and airport.

The title *Play Pause* alludes to the installation’s strange sense of detachment coupled with vulnerability. This tension arises in several ways: the rhythm and pace of the installation, the space itself, and the particular images displayed. The first juxtaposition occurs between the surround sound pulsing around slow and still images. The images are slowly animated, and only switch up every few seconds, while the sound, especially in the scenes featuring sports (baseball) or music, adds a vibrancy of movement, a “play.” There is one exception in the dance club, when the images are animated to match the music—changing red to blue to green and yellow, they pulsate at the same beat of the music. Beyond this exceptional scene, the pace of the piece normally levels on this strange pull between two worlds of moving and stopping.

The lines of the drawings are also demonstrative of this contradiction of play and pause. They are at once empty and vacant outlines, but by virtue of their hand-drawn quality, they are also personalized, unique and life-like. This play-pause tension resembles a kind of existentialism of the line—the anonymity of the public scenes treated with aloof lines, are transformed when they are treated with the lightness and carefree movement she uses to depict planes flying, people talking, or dancing. Together, these intimate moments, like the early journal entries in the Pixelvision pieces, receive the same reserved and careful treatment. *Play Pause* is on view at the Whitney until September 20, 2009.

The New York Times

Animating the Everyday Sublime

By Roberta Smith

May 1, 2009

“Play Pause,” Sadie Benning’s new stop-action animation, is a small, multifaceted gem. On view in the lobby gallery of the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), it uses an avalanche of simple, almost naïve gouache drawings to prowl the margins of urban society. It also returns her talent to the museum where she first became famous.

Ms. Benning’s work was first seen at the Whitney in 1993, when, barely 20, she became the standout discovery of that year’s biennial. Success, however, was not entirely new. Ms. Benning had started to make films several years earlier and had already received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Her contributions to the ’93 biennial were short black-and-white films that had been shot in her bedroom using what was, more or less, a toy camera. Spare and diaristic, with an irresistible hands-on charm, they were in essence stop-action puppet shows made with an array of drawings, handwritten notes, cut-out silhouettes and in-camera editing. They gave voice to the age-old adolescent longing for knowledge — of self, of love, of the world. While evoking the spirit of [Joseph Cornell](#), they also extended the implicitly tender set-up photography of artists like James Casebere and Laurie Simmons into film. In “Play Pause,” Ms. Benning’s work continues to wear its heart on its sleeve, if more covertly, along with a sewn-on patch reading “Do it Yourself.” It is the film of an artist who has become sadder and wiser about life, while greatly expanding her capacity for intimacy and understanding.

“Play Pause” is a low-key picture of what might be called the everyday sublime. Solveig Nelson has provided its beautifully accurate (yet largely electronic) soundtrack of city sounds, whether a subway singer or traffic noises, a jackhammer or squirrels rifling through a garbage can, people talking in a bar or gates being called in an airport.

Ms. Benning’s gouaches have a direct, folk-art awkwardness reminiscent of [James Castle](#) or [Jacob Lawrence](#). They are impressively rich in their use of darks and lights, lines and washes, and occasionally colored by screens of red, blue or green. Their time on the split screen often feels too brief, and while they use a full range of cinematic long shots and close-ups, they also bring to mind Helen Levitt’s street photographs and Doug Aitken’s “Electric Earth” (1999), a majestic four-screen video mediation on a lonely urban teenager.

Their childlike artifice contrasts with a surprisingly full and poignant account of what a walker in any city might see: people ambling along sidewalks, old stores flanked by empty lots, new buildings, men sitting in parks reading newspapers, other people observing the street from apartment windows. It is a picture of life in progress, in all its wondrous banality.

Its leisurely pace speeds up only for boys playing soccer in a playground and people mingling and dancing under a disco ball. Occasionally there’s a sense of foreboding; at one point we seem to be viewing the street from inside a security booth.

And the lives of gay people, men and women, closeted and out, conventional and flamboyant, are a continuing theme. Leather bars are visited, sometimes by accident; a television show titled “Lesbian Makeovers” is glimpsed.

“Play Pause” ends ambiguously. While the longing that is one of Ms. Benning’s major themes compels someone to an airport, it is not clear if a plane is boarded or not. What matters is the sense that Ms. Benning’s story and her telling of it can sustain repeated viewings; its mysteries reward exploration.

“Play Pause” continues through Sept. 20 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.

Stop-Start Beat: Walking the City

Sadie Benning's Play Pause, Whitney Museum, New York

By Saige Walton RealTime Issue 94, December- January 2009, p. 28

Saige Walton teaches in the Screen Studies Program at The University of Melbourne and is an Assistant Curator with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image.



Drawings for Play Pause 2001-06,
Gouache on Paper, collection of the
artist.

© Sadie Benning

TO TELL THE STORIES OF THE CITY, MICHEL DE CERTEAU REMINDS US, YOU CANNOT APPROACH URBAN SPACE FROM ON HIGH. YOU HAVE TO BEGIN WITH THE FOOTPATH. FOR DE CERTEAU, THE CITY COMES TO LIFE AT THE GROUND LEVEL WHERE, CLASPED BY THE BUSTLE OF THE STREETS, BODIES WILL ENCOUNTER ONE ANOTHER IN VARYING MODES OF CONNECTIVITY (AS LOVERS, FRIENDS, WORK COLLEAGUES, OBLIVIOUS PASSERS-BY). IN THE CITY AS LIVED-SPACE, PEDESTRIANS TREAD THEIR OWN EXPRESSIVE PATHS OF CIRCULATION AND CONNECTION AND PHYSICALLY 'WRITE' URBAN SPACE IN WALKING IT. ON THE STREET, ACCORDING TO DE CERTEAU, THE STORIES OF THE CITY ARE SPOKEN BY A CHORUS OF FOOTSTEPS.

On view earlier this year in the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Sadie Benning's latest video installation, Play Pause (2006), captures the chorus of footsteps that make up a day-in-the-life of an anonymous, post 9/11 city. The installation begins, fittingly enough, with hand-drawn scenes of the street, accompanied by an audio-track of echoing footsteps, traffic noises and chirping birds. Play Pause then proceeds to move through hundreds of Benning's gouache on paper illustrations (created by the artist between 2001 and 2006) which are projected onto two adjoining screens. Arranged in a loose narrative structure and scanned for two-channel projection, the gouaches of Play Pause detail the movements, gestures and everyday practices of a multitude of nameless urban inhabitants. Benning's characters walk the city, they idle about on the footpath and loiter in doorways; they wait for the bus, travel the subway, watch television, drink, flirt and dance in bars.

Largely black and white, with occasional chromatic flashes of red, green and blue filters, the gouaches of Play Pause favour schematic outlines, bold blacks and grey washes

rather than the rendering of intricate detail. They seem child-like and noticeably hand-crafted, reminiscent of the low-fi aesthetic that made Benning's name as a video artist during the 90s with shorts such as *Jollies* (1990) and *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1992). Shot on a Fisher-Price Pixelvision 'toy' camera—that was actually given to Benning by her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning—her early videos are infused with a playful sensibility. They take place in the artist's bedroom and are often narrated in the first-person (by Benning herself, who appears as a series of close-ups of eyes and lips). Abetted by scrawled notes held up to the camera, puppets drawn and painted on cardboard or objects such as Matchbox cars and dolls, Benning re-enacted the dysfunction and loneliness of adolescence with do-it-yourself charm in these early videos, well before the age of amateur confessionals on YouTube. For all their apparent simplicity, Benning's shorts are lyrical mixtures of images, music and text. The surface effects of Pixelvision are fleshed out with diaristic confessionals that spoke to Benning's own lesbian identity, her crushes and confusions and the process of coming out.

Play Pause is a definite departure from Benning's earlier work. Certainly, there are queer bodies to be found throughout *Play Pause*—her characters visit leather bars, have gay sex and watch lesbian reality shows on television. That said, the stark minimalism of the drawn line in *Play Pause* cues us into what this portrait of urban life is really all about—the phenomenological properties of movement, energy and stasis in their own right, as they belong to bodies inhabiting the city from all walks of life. What fascinates about *Play Pause* is Benning's continued ability to endow the flat, the drawn and the two-dimensional with a strong physicality. While her earlier videos were often enraptured with material surfaces and an up-close attention to objects, faces and details, they were mainly concerned with the expression of Benning's own adolescent subjectivity; they matched the effects of Pixelvision (for instance, the heightened textural grain, flattening of space and dull sound that it lends to its images) with the rendering of internal psychic space.

In *Play Pause*, Benning's preoccupation with the surface continues through the evocative integration of still drawing and video. *Play Pause*, however, is not concerned with interiority, much less with the personal autobiography of Benning-the-artist. Directed in collaboration with Solveig Nelson (who also provided ambient field recordings of city sounds for the installation, which are intermixed throughout with Benning's original score), *Play Pause* speaks to the city's chorus of footsteps through highly rhythmic transitions between immobility and movement. Through the gouache drawings and their subtle animation, coupled with the energetic pulse of the installation's soundtrack, pacing and editing, the work strikingly evokes the very action of walking the city through its stop-start beat and physicality. Benning affectively conveys not just what we might see upon walking this cityscape (sports games, store-front advertisements, dog-filled parks, missed opportunities with another) but, more importantly, what walking the city feels like.



Drawings for Play Pause 2001-06, Gouache on Paper, collection of the artist
© Sadie Benning

As the title of Benning's installation indicates, the piece deliberately oscillates between movement and stasis. Benning's gouaches will change over every few seconds on the split screen only to cede to durational takes, long shots or close-ups of the still drawings. The sensation of walking is evoked on a number of levels: by the meandering structure and organisation of the drawings, which follow no fixed trajectory and conclude with scenes of an airport and planes taking off (although it remains unclear whether characters are arriving or leaving); and by the juxtaposition of still images against a densely layered sonic atmosphere (the rumble of an underground subway, for example, set alongside drumbeats and electronic percussion). Indeed, it is Benning's rising and falling score that endows the installation with vibrancy and movement, even when the images on-screen are suddenly arrested.

The stop-start sensibility of *Play Pause* offers a decidedly physical invitation to its viewer, along the lines of what film theorist and curator Laura Marks would designate its haptic visuality. In these terms, the eye of the viewer becomes restless; our vision is strongly encouraged to move. Instead of being drawn into a perspectival space and the depths of the image, our eyes scan along and across a horizontal surface. Given its interest in the drawn surface, such is the haptic invitation that *Play Pause* extends to the visitor. Here, the eye can discern the material textures of the ink that has seeped into Benning's paper or flits between the often speedy alternations of the gouache drawings, moments of unexpected colour on screen and images that seem perpetually on the point of unrest and transition. The haptic actions of the viewer's eye elicited by *Play Pause* likewise contribute to the work's transitions between stasis and movement. We might not walk the city alongside Benning's protagonists but we emulate the stop-start physicality of the installation itself, through the actions of a roving and embodied eye.

At barely 20, Sadie Benning became the Whitney's video art darling; included in its 1993 Biennial and once again in the 2000 Biennial. It seems only appropriate that Benning's latest video installation return to the Whitney as part of its Contemporary Series. This time around, however, Benning is no longer a girl with a video diary. *Play Pause* suggests the beginnings of a different affective beat from the artist.

Sadie Benning, *Play Pause*, 2006. Two-channel video projection from hard drive (created from gouache drawings on paper), 29:22 minutes. Director Sadie Benning, in collaboration with Solveig Nelson, collection of the artists; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, April 22-Sept 20.

Sadie Benning: Orchard Gallery

by Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Dec, 2007

Sadie Benning has garnered widespread acclaim since she was a teenager for her do-it-yourself approach to artmaking, especially among those of her postpunk peers who favor collaboration over individuality. Her career arc, though fairly well known, bears repeating: In 1989, as a teenager, Benning began to make candid, diaristic videos in her bedroom with a Fisher-Price PixelVision toy camera. Ten years later, she co-founded the feminist indie band Le Tigre. After years of incorporating politics, queer sexuality, and personal history into her work, that Benning has taken an increasing interest in abstraction should come as no surprise. Like a fun-house mirror, however, her new work contracts and contorts her established preoccupation with eroticism, sex, and desire without once concealing it. Though no longer trading in representation rife with emotion or pathos, Benning's recent output sees her at her most inspiring.

Scheduled to coincide with a weekend screening of Benning's two-channel video installation *Play Pause*, 2006, at the Dia Art Foundation space in Chelsea, this exhibition presented viewers with the full range of Benning's multifaceted practice, including work in drawing, video, installation, and music. The sole PixelVision video in the show, *One Liner*, 2003, which follows a pen as it draws a series of dots (and seems to try but fail to make a straight line), here provided a visible link between Benning's past and present forays into abstraction, while referencing her ongoing interest in the intimate and the handmade, the bodily and the tender.

On display throughout the gallery were nine small geometric colored pencil drawings (all 2007) depicting shafted and rounded shapes colliding and merging with one another, as if engaged in various stages of sexual activity. Inspired by Gordon Matta-Clark's use of heavy boards to mount his photographs, Benning has attached these delicate renderings to rectangular pieces of bookbinding board with softly rounded corners. The drawings' candy-colored palette distinguishes these works from the monumental and vivid "Head" paintings (1999-2006) that debuted at the Wexner Center for the Arts earlier this year. Instead of that series' strong graphic line or the dense pixilation of her videos, Benning here makes pencil marks that are cautious and mutable. (The icon depicting poop going "back and forth forever" devised by Miranda July for her film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* [2005] comes to mind).

In the center of the room, a record player with a series of six LPs, titled *Play Pause Tapes: Soundtracks for Looking and Listening*, 2007, provided a sound track of jarring rhythms and repetitive beats that energized these otherwise placid drawings and further riffed on the abstract tenor of the show. The LPs, reformatted from cassettes of the kind that Benning made in her youth with a boom box and turntable, feature spliced-up funk, disco, soul, and R & B, juxtaposed with isolated instrumental sounds. Visitors were encouraged to change the records and experiment with Benning's eclectic mixes, an enticing offer that yielded some pleasurable results.

The title of the show, "Form of a Waterfall," was a reference to the DC Comics animated teenage superheroes "The Wonder Twins," who change shape by commanding "Form of a ___!" Certainly the eroticized shapes intermingling in Benning's new drawings engage in transformative actions as well, offering a porous reading of sexuality and gendered identity. Perhaps these works should be considered alongside other contemporary art incorporating sexual themes, such the collectively produced journal *LTTTR*, whose fifth issue, "Positively Nasty," provocatively surveys queer desire. However, taking into consideration Benning's figurative work, for which she is better known, this show of exclusively abstract works proved that she is able to comfortably navigate through abstraction and figuration while retaining the rare ability to create an effective metaphoric mash-up.

SAATCHI ONLINE

Sadie Benning At Orchard, New York

By Saatchi Online · September 21, 2007 · Liechtenstein ·



Sadie Benning at Orchard, New York.





Accompanying 'Play Pause', Sadie Benning's two-channel video installation project recently screened at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, a show of her drawings, video and sound works now showing at Orchard shows the artist's rather minimalist, spiritually intimate side. Stop by the gallery tonight and catch a special, bonus screening of film/video works by Jennifer Reeves.

Orchard is one of those galleries without an external sign. It's next to a trendy trainer shop, and Benning's show is full of further clues of confirmation for the visitor: look for two walls full of palm-sized drawn construction paper panels bearing graphic designs made with coloured pencils, slightly, crudely anthropomorphic geometric patterns permutating in and out of the storyboardish grids. In the middle of the room there is a turntable on which records of found sound material are being played – someone (I'm not sure whether she was a gallery assistant or visitor) switched the vinyl whenever it ran out, which gave the sonic experience of the show an entirely unrepeatable, live club atmosphere. It's possibly the most enticing aspect of the show – if the sounds had been coming from the trendy trainer shop, we would have no doubt gone in there instead. The records represent a selection of Benning's 'play/pause' audio cassettes – layered analog cut-ups made of sounds extracted from both tape and vinyl recordings. There's also a strange (gessoed board?) cut-out of two silhouetted figures bound by an ellipsis-like dotted thought line, and a very grainy black and white single-channel Pixelvision video of what looks like an ink line being drawn, suitably titled 'One Liner', at the back of the gallery.

The installation as a whole feels rather airy, ample, visually spacious, but memorable nonetheless for the ease with which the works, so different in form, bear the artist's interest in contemporary forms of abstraction fluidly (the title of the show, 'Form of a waterfall', makes direct reference to the tv animation series 'Wonder Twins' manner of beckoning transformation via spoken-command-logic, ie, preceding any wish of becoming by the prefix 'form of a..'). These drawings, simple sound collages and minimalist film, are a fascinating, more interioristic and sedate counterpoint to the work for which artistically precocious Benning has long been celebrated – her experimental performance-based diaristic video art that developed a pioneering engagement with queer gender identity, made when she was fifteen (and her inclusion in the 1993 Whitney Biennial when she was twenty), and of course her subsequent influential genre-mashing work with feminist electropop group Le Tigre. All that work, now having spread like wildfire and incorporated into the mainstream, was at the time of its creation infused by a sense of wanting to let the outsider into the artist's private world; the stuff in this show, long-standing projects still bearing the artist's trademarks (Pixelvision, mixing sound with performance, and her familiar drawn graphic style), invites the viewer to see a different, more meditative (definitely more subtle) and associative expanded practice.

A solo exhibition of Benning's large scale portrait paintings along with the premier of "PLAY PAUSE," a video made in collaboration with Solveig Nelson, was held at the Wexner Center in 2006.

Tonight's screening of film/video works by Jennifer Reeves is just part of the gallery's running schedule of special events organised in conjunction with Benning's exhibit; additional previews will follow on 28 Sept and 5 Oct, of short films by Alexander Kluge (newly translated by Lili Chin and Leslie Thornton) and of 'Unidentified Vietnam No. 18' by Lana Lin and Lan-Thao Lam, respectively.

Lupe Nunez-Fernandez

SADIE BENNING, 'FORM OF A WATERFALL'

To 7 Oct 2007.

Orchard

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'PLAY PAUSE' was screened from 13-15 Sept at Dia Art Foundation www.diaart.org, 548 West 22nd Street, New York.



Former Le Tigre Member's Stuttering Sexuality

Sadie Benning draws a line at the Orchard Gallery

By David Everitt Howe Tuesday, Sep 18 2007

Starting in the eighth grade, Le Tigre co-founder Sadie Benning crafted audiocassettes of spliced sound using a boom box and turntable. Referred to as "play/pause" cassette tapes, they fluctuate wildly in tone, sampling from disco anthems, rhythm-and-soul instrumentation, and other genres in repetitious fits of starts and stops. According to the artist, they were initially created to irritate family members, but subsequently the tapes' sonic amalgam of diverse pop influences became audio diaries of an adolescent grappling with self-awareness.

Transferred to records that play from a turn-table in the center of Orchard's front gallery, these "play/pause" cassette tapes offer a soundtrack to Benning's evocatively unwieldy solo exhibition, "Form of a Waterfall." The sole video work, *One Liner*, shot on a Pixelvision camera, is deceptively titled. Hardly a one-liner at all, it's a grainy black-and-white video of a mark being drawn on paper, set to disjointed musical selections. The line bulges where the pen rests—not perfectly straight, but a bit askew.

A series of untitled drawings, aesthetically inspired by '80s arcade games, is similarly complex and unsettling—the playfully adolescent, candied coloration chafes against their geometric rigidity. The imminent collision between rectangular shafts and rounded, supple forms conveys a stuttering sexuality.

According to the press release, the exhibition takes its title from the animated TV series *The Wonder Twins*, in which the characters transform into different objects using the command "Form of a _____!" The exhibition tries awkwardly to give shape to the shapelessness of sexual fumbling, but the clumsiness is not a bad thing: Sexuality is often awkward. Though the drawings are just as complex without a soundtrack, the eclectic musical offerings provide compelling contexts. There's a visceral pleasure in changing the records in the gallery and listening to them for the first time; they play with the malleability of experience, the fickleness of mood. Benning said that creating the drawings left her in a trance—a trance that will leave the viewer with much to untangle.