

BORDERCROSSINGS

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Imperfect Perfections **The Art of Julia Dault**

Introduction by Meeka Walsh
Interview by Robert Enright



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1. Julia Dault, *Untitled 27, 11:15 AM–2:00 PM, January 23, 2013*, Plexiglas, Formica, Everlast boxing wraps, dimensions variable. As depicted: 172.1 x 124.5 x 108 cm. Images courtesy of the artist and Jessica Bradley, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Preceding page: detail.

2. "Julia Dault: Solo Exhibition," 2013, installation view, Jessica Bradley Gallery, Toronto.

Art is not entertainment and should be taken seriously, especially when it is potentially dangerous. Then it should be treated with respect; awe and pleasure can follow later. Every one of Julia Dault's sculptures is a measure of the artist. Each work could be explosive and each contains inside its dimensions a measure of the artist's force and strength. If you snipped the bands that hold her sculptural work in their assembled forms and could apply an odometer, speedometer, thermometer—some measuring device to record the field of energy that was released—you would have, in speed or light or heat, a biothermal portrait of the artist.

Julia Dault's work is to be reckoned with. She is eyes wide open, has a degree in art history, has worked as an art critic and none of the issues of contemporary art elude her. In the interview that follows she identified in a ready list "the idea of contingency and performance, the place of abstract painting and the place of the maker." Beauty doesn't frighten her but it's not an uncomplicated, uninflected beauty she seeks. She wants to engage and involve the viewer in the process and therefore in an individual reading of her work. She wants control—while admitting to an admiration for the gestural work of the Abstract Expressionists, minus the heroic trappings—and achieves this by creating rules and structures, as she says, "looking for frames and assigning logic." She wants balance—the sculptural works certainly require it—but she also wants the cracks to show, a space for surprise and discovery to keep it all interesting. A balance too, between process and final form, where perfect equilibrium might obscure the actual achieving. The flaws insure what she describes as a "dirty Minimalism."

When I saw Dault's recent sculptures at her exhibition at Jessica Bradley gallery in Toronto in January of this year I thought of Dan Graham, not because they look in any real way like Graham's pavilions but because of their shared minimalist proclivities, the architectural/structural nature of Dault's assembly and because of the role of the viewer for both. In Dault's work the transparency is largely procedural or process-based, but it's there. It's not the physical transparency/



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Two sculptures, *Untitled 26* and *Untitled 27*, both 2013 and both including the time of their making, from outset to completion, and the dates on which they were produced for her exhibition in January at Jessica Bradley, are taut, finely balanced, potentially explosive and luminously beautiful. They very much carry a bodily presence although they are as far from something organic as a work can be. It may be their standing secure on the floor without the intervention of a plinth, or their reliance on the wall for support and completion, adding an element of vulnerability. They and the paintings are, in their assertiveness, strength, beauty and intelligence, a portrait of the artist.

The following interview is collaged from two separate conversations this year: the first on January

25th at the Jessica Bradley Annex on the day Julia Dault's exhibition opened and the second on March 29th by phone to her Brooklyn studio.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You were an art critic and I wonder what made you go to the other side to become an artist?

JULIA DAULT: It's more like I've come full circle. When I was growing up I knew I wanted to be an artist and I actually got into art school on a full scholarship that I decided to turn down. I thought I didn't know enough about the world to make art. I ended up going to McGill to do art history and to learn about the historical trajectory of work I was interested in. Criticism was part of that process; if I wanted to make art I would have to be able to understand it and conceive of it and write about it. Increasingly, I thought I would continue doing criticism because it was fun and I was intellectually engaged with the world, but as I was writing about other artists' work this creeping feeling developed that I was, in fact, envious. That's when I started thinking about returning to my initial goal, so I applied to graduate school, moved to New York and committed myself to being an artist.

But because of your interest in language you felt that you should be a conceptual artist. How long did it take you to jettison that notion?

It took about a year. I applied with a conceptually driven portfolio because I did think that language would be the centre and foundation of my practice. It took a year to realize that I didn't want to work that way and then three years more to get the critic in me to be silent. The critic was always there on my shoulder as I was working, and she was actually very helpful in editing in the studio.

But you seemed to have retained a conceptual approach to artmaking because you set rules for yourself to which you fairly rigidly adhere. That strikes me as a conceptual strategy.

Definitely. I think that's the happy balance that I found. Just painting, which is, of course, remarkable and amazing and difficult, didn't prove to be enough for me. I move through the world creating rules and structures, looking for frames and assigning logic. So my way of working is a happy medium between that conceptual foundation and all the things I have always loved about abstract painting, including paint and tools and colour. It



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is important to me that I'm able to define what a conceptual project may be, and still retain a painting process.

The material choices you have made are particularly interesting. In your sculpture why have you decided to work with unmanageable pieces of thick Plexiglas? Did you set out to make it an even more rigorous process than it would normally be? I began the sculpture initially with large sheets of plywood and with Mason Line, this beautiful cord bricklayers use that comes in a fluorescent colour palette. I began working with those materials in a sort of "what-if experimentation" to see what would happen when form and labour meet. Then I started going to salvage yards here in New York and found these abandoned sheets of Formica in a strange 1950s colour palette. Formica is unwieldy in a different way; it's thin and light but it can

snap and crack and it is sharp and requires physical force. I began to test that balance between the material characteristics and my physical capabilities. I've always worked in that realm where those two forces meet and play.

You have a piece called *Wrangler*, which seems to me not just the name of a work of art but also a description of your methodology.

Definitely. But it is funny because while the idea of athleticism and physical capability are important, I hesitate to use verbs such as wrangle because they privilege process over final form, and what interests me is finding a balance between those two things.

Your paintings seem to really want structure. What I mean is, they are about form-shaping as much as they are about mark-making. They're



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1. *Untitled 26, 10:30 AM–2:30 PM*, January 22, 2013, Plexiglas, Formica, Everlast boxing wraps, cotton cord, dimensions variable. As depicted: 242.6 x 143.5 x 94 cm. Courtesy the artist and Jessica Bradley, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

2. *Untitled 26, 10:30 AM–2:30 PM*, January 22, 2013, detail.

concerned with gestures adding up to some kind of form or structure.

Yes. In *Rustic Hero*, for example, gesture is present but there is also this notion of gestures coming together to create a bridge through which the viewer might see my intention in repeating the way marks are applied to the surface. But I don't want a perfect grid; so in some instances the grid dissolves, and is imperfect in others. I can't fully believe in perfection and yet there is an attempt at a logic in the mark-making because what I also don't want is the complete arbitrariness of the mark. This gets back to the rules; I want there to be some form of repetition or standardization that makes it easier for the viewer to read the composition and the process. I see it as a way for the viewer to get into the work.

It is interesting that while you may not want perfection, you certainly seek after beauty. It is one of the by-products of your process.

Beauty is not a bad word for me. I don't know the cause of this aversion to beauty in contemporary discourse. Maybe it is seen as facile but I don't fear it. It's not my single goal but I like that they're beautiful. Then again, there is this question of the balance between process and final form; if the final form is beautiful, how do we also evidence the process in getting there? From a distance the sculptures look pristine but when you approach them you see the bumps and scratches that happened during their making. That's why I refer to them as dirty Minimalism. It's a shorthand way of saying that they're not perfect and that lack of perfection is the source of their beauty. The evidence of their coming together is another layer of beauty.

You have admitted your love of Abstract Expressionism and you work within a vocabulary that has the look of gestural abstraction. That painting history, as you know, is a loaded one: male and heroic and hierarchical. Have you had difficulty in coursing through the Scylla and Charybdis of Modernism?

The place of the ego or the place of the maker has always been an interest of mine and in part it drove me to want to make work *in situ*, where there is less distance between the maker and the form. Implicit in this is a critique of the kind of art that you phone in and have fabricated. I have to be present for the making; it's always me versus the materials. I can't have help. But what also plays into it is my defiance of the Ab-Ex machismo myth of the maker. The viewer should know that it is me, Julia Dault, making the piece, but they don't need to know anything about me. I'm a presence and a person in space but it's not specifically about me and the painting or sculpture as an emotional output. It's me as a maker exploring the various iterations of tool and surface. But the modernist issue of the authority of the artist is something I think about and work through all the time.

Your tools are evidence of your presence and physical engagement in the process. So the tool is instrumental, not just practically but in a philosophical way.

I like to say that the tool standardizes my gesture but not so much that it looks as if it's mechanically reproduced or fabricated from afar. That's why I like the idea of there being a grid, however much it may be falling apart. It's obvious that the tool is helping to create marks but the mark is imperfect because it's made by hand. So I hope the tool helps to translate the place of the mechanical and the embodied along the surface of the painting. Every painting I make involves a tool and a gesture of removal. I do use brushes to create the monochromatic surfaces from which I then strip paint away, but I don't just brush arbitrarily and expressionistically over the surface.

You said you're an absolute demon in a hardware store because of your obsession. What are some of the unconventional tools you use to make your paintings?

I'm in my studio now and looking. I don't even know what to call some of them. One is a rack that looks as if you'd hang small tools on it. There are also big, heavy door handles that I use in the same way you'd drag a squeegee across the painting surface.

Is it close to what Richter does with his squeegees?

Yes. Because what I do is pressure-sensitive; where I lift off is evident and I want that. You can see the stretcher bars, so you're aware that labour and force were used. When you're pulling and dragging, there is this element of surprise.

You also make your own tools don't you?

Yes, sometimes I cut into sheets of rubber and create combs. A lot of combs are used by home decorators for texturizing plaster. I've used tree branches where I have thick cotton on the end of each branch and I drag that across the surface of the painting. Occasionally I'll use my own hand. I've done that in a piece called *Golden Girl*, which is a draped painting; a hybridized sculpture painting. I used my hand as if it were a tool; I put on a thick glove and held my hand very rigidly and dragged it across the surface. But that is rare. Usually it's a question of coming across something in the world. You should see me walking down the street in Brooklyn, finding stuff in the garbage and seeing what happens when something I've found becomes a tool for a painting.

One of the intriguing things about Brice Marden's "Cold Mountain" series was his use of tree branches to get as far away from the surface as he could. It was a way of resisting facility. Are your tools also ways of breaking aesthetic habits?

Definitely. Because a tool will restrict an otherwise free movement or gesture. And physical proximity to the actual surface absolutely affects the mark that ends up happening. The branch I use—I have it right here—is extremely long and allows me to be

The ideas of contingency and performance, the place of abstract painting and the place of the maker are all important questions to me. I am concerned with history and how it needs to change.

present in the making but not fully in control of the mark.

***Sure You Can* is another of your draped paintings. Are they meant to occupy a territory between sculpture and painting?**

Yes. The idea came out of my thinking about nomadism and post-nationalism; what would it mean to live more lightly; what would it mean to create a painting that you could roll up under your arm and take with you, or fold up and put into your pocket. The idea was that they are never really finished, and that the collector or owner of the piece becomes complicit, especially with a piece like *Sure You Can*. It comes with pins and a very simple set of instructions and when the collector receives the piece, they install it themselves. They have images of previous iterations but the feeling of finality, of something being finished, is something that they decide. I'm turning them somehow into collaborators. *Golden Girl* has a more detailed set of instructions because it has a clearer articulation of how it should hang. But it just rolls up. That notion of lightness is really important to me with the sculptures as well. You unstrap them, ship them flat and you're good to go.

I know that instructions come with the sculptures for remaking them. Do they carry the original name of their making, or when they get reinstalled do they become new pieces with new names? Clearly, if you're not there, the duration for installing the piece would be different from its original making.

Good question. What happens is this: take *Untitled 26*, the black and white sculpture that was in Jessica Bradley's show. When it is reinstalled it will retain that title but in the reinstallation the date and time stamp will change to reflect the new iteration. It's still the same piece because it's the same combination of colours in the same order as the original piece; that's why it is important that it retain the same number. I have assistants who will occasionally reinstall for me and if they do, their names also get attached to that new title because if someone works with me they deserve credit. Since it's their labour and effort that has recreated the piece, their name should become part of the title. The studio keeps track and we have every single iteration that any piece has undergone.

I don't know if you allow people to actually watch you make a sculpture but there's a way in which you perform the sculpture. Are you conscious that you're working inside a performative frame of reference?

Yes, the sculptures are private performances. When I am making them people want to watch, but nobody has. When I install in museums, I'm not insane in trying to control the space and

have it be empty. I recently installed a piece at The Armory Show and there were people around. But I won't let anyone sit there and gaze at me when I work, mostly because it is important that the action be recreated in the mind of the viewer. My worst nightmare is that I am long gone and displayed right next to the piece itself is a video of me building a sculpture.

To me that completely defeats the purpose. When I was installing for the Gwangju Biennale the exhibition's publicity staff was there and took photos of me while working. I'm not really a diva, but I had to ask multiple times for them not to take photographs.

What makes you decide to wrangle a sculpture rather than paint a painting? I guess I'm asking an old fashioned question about inspiration and the muse.

I don't make sculptures in the studio anymore, so one answer is logistical and practical. I build sculptures specifically out in the world for reasons. I used to build them in my studio when I was practising and exploring what the materials could do but now I do that wholly in other spaces. So the muse strikes in the studio solely for paintings and drapes.

Looking at your sculptures I was reminded of a poem by G M Hopkins, called "God's Grandeur." He writes that grandeur "will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed." It occurred to me that "shining from shook foil" is a fine description of what happens in your sculptures. Despite the industrial nature of your materials, you end up making very beautiful objects.

I am absolutely after beauty in their making. When I get that visceral feeling I know the sculpture is working. I love the part of the process when I lay out sheets of colour. I don't always know how many sheets or what colours I'll be using, but I'll know how many sculptures I have to make. If it's only one, for instance, I'll lay out almost double or triple what I'll need in the space and then begin to bend and play with combinations. I'm mindful of that visceral feeling when I'm working.

Are there times when the material is getting the better of you and you're not able to wrangle it?

Oh my goodness, yes. You can tell by the date and time stamp. I just did one in Portland, Oregon in a private museum, and I had this moment when I thought, "I hate art." I thought, "This is getting the better of me," but part of it is the perseverance, the not giving up. It ended up taking me an extremely long time but I was very happy with the results. I do set the stage for things to happen, or not, in this dramatic and condensed time frame.



Kissyface, 2013, acrylic on canvas, oil on vinyl, 61 x 45.7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zurich. Photograph: Myriam Babin.

The sculptures embody the narrative of their own making. Do you think they speak to the process of their own creation?

Yes. I aim for self-evidence. What would it mean to create an anti-illusionistic piece that is as transparent as I could make it? I'm intrigued by this idea of something being self-contained or something in it being self-evident, being more accessible and more open to a viewer, so that to understand the work they don't have to go off and read a press release.

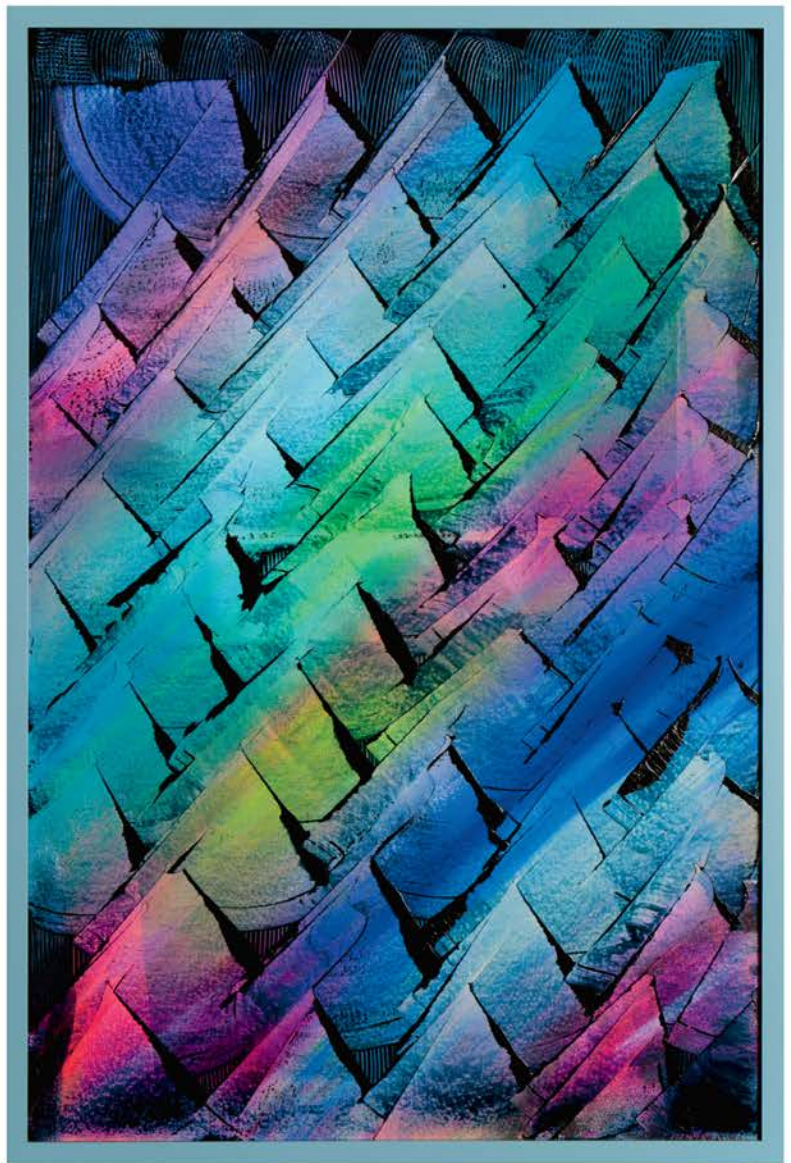
Do you also find the painting in the making because of the way that layers and colours end up getting revealed? Is there a process of discovery involved in making the painting?

Yes. I call it "making is thinking," which isn't my own term. It's Richard Sennett's, from *The Craftsman*. But this element of surprise must exist for me and that is one of the rules for the painting. With each tool, each move and each surface there are new combinations of discoveries—and if that doesn't happen it's not that fulfilling. Then I feel it's just painting by rote or I'm becoming formulaic, which is another nightmare for me.

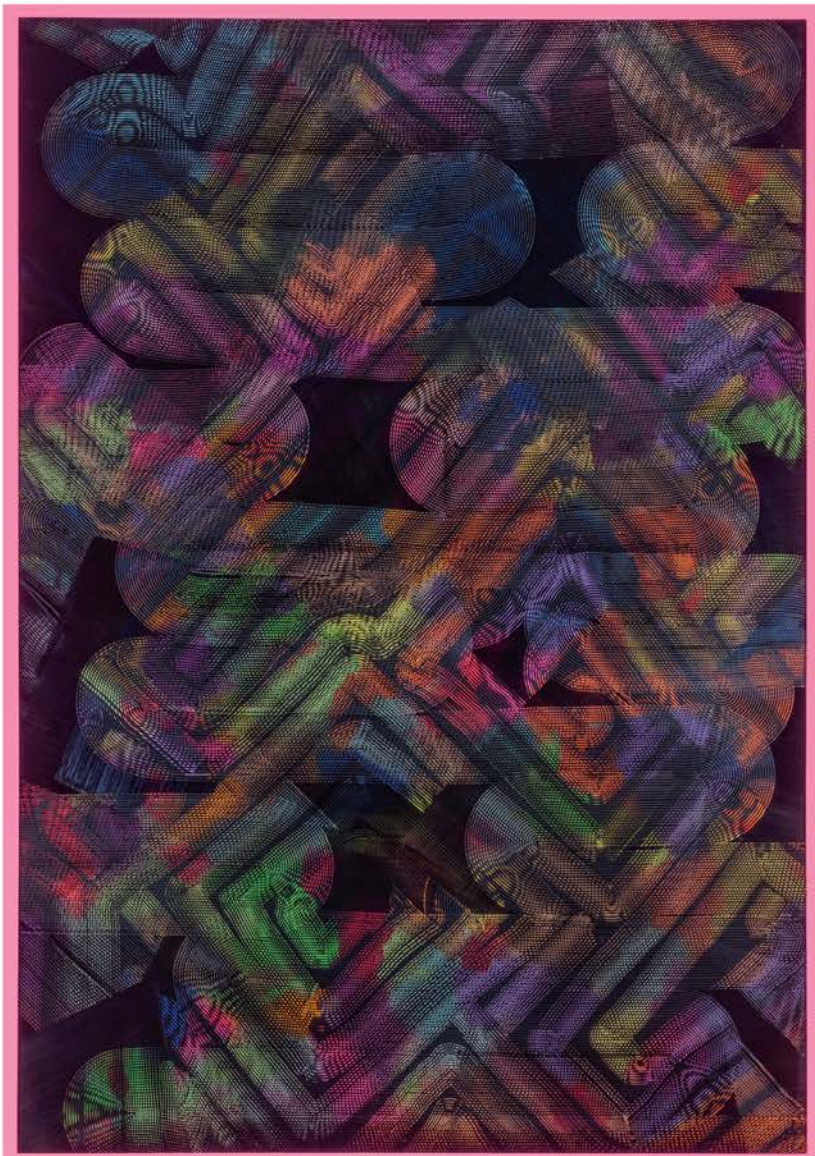
You call your palette "industrial and gaudy" and you also never mix colours. Why set those limitations?

This is where the paintings and the sculptures are quite similar. With the sculptures there is this notion of found colour, that I don't affect the palette but that I work with the spectrum I have. So when I use fabrics like silk or spandex in the paintings—I just finished a painting with gold pleather—it's me reacting to what's in front of me. It's the same thing with the fluorescent or industrial palette. I don't know what it is about these very strange paints that I find so appealing. They just are what they are and I deal with them on their own terms. I don't want to anthropomorphize paint, it's risky terrain to move into, but the idea of response is a way to answer your question, in the same way that with the sculptures I'm responding to the sheets and to the space. What happens, then, is the form of the sculpture. I think the paintings also carry that response.

When we last talked you mentioned the phrase the "beautiful hideous." Is that an aesthetic aspiration?



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The *jolie laide*, yes. The question I like to ask is, "What does it mean to thwart good taste?" What is good taste? What does it mean to move through the world and think, this is perfect, or that couch would be beautiful, or isn't that simplicity magical? Why? Where is the line, and what happens if you step over it ever so slightly and use something that would otherwise be really gaudy, but in a context that you can use that characteristic to your advantage? Why are we always after this perfectly balanced aesthetic? I guess the sculptures are perfectly balanced and aesthetically sound but that's where the dirty comes in. I don't find it fulfilling if it's just beautiful. That's why there has to be a move, a push, a bit of tackiness or an edge that you wouldn't think would be there. That is a crux of my practice.



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1. *More than Words*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, oil on vinyl in painted wood frame, 91.4 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zurich.

2. *Steel Magnolias*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, oil on vinyl in painted wood frame, 156.2 x 108 cm. Courtesy the artist and Jessica Bradley, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

I would say the pink frame in *Steel Magnolias* is one of those moments when you step over that edge. Why that frame?

Exactly. I just had an image in my mind of this beautiful fluorescent neon frame. That is a great example of just going over that line. I mean the painting probably could have held without it, but for me that was the imperfect perfect way to contain the painting.

I'm intrigued by how different the paintings look. Certain of them, like *Heavy Metal*, *New Wave* and *Rustic Hero*, have a pattern that looks industrial, as if they had a kind of carapace.

Heavy Metal is interesting because it is on a metallic canvas, so when you look at it from the side it has a sheen. To make that piece I had one tool in one

hand and a different tool in another. I'd make a mark with my right hand and thwart it with my left, and move almost like choreography across the surface. Sometimes people will come to my shows and they'll think it's a group show. If I am trying to discover something new with each painting, then I obviously don't work in a strict, serial way. I don't think I ever could, and yet I think it is clear that there is one maker. What's consistent is the appearance of experimentation between various tools and various surfaces. I like the idea that there isn't this easy seriality to the work.

Are you after originality?

I hope what I make is unique. But every artist hopes they are making something new. I try to give a nod to my art historical trajectory. I think artists should be responsible about knowing where they fit in, what they owe history and what they can do to evolve it. The ideas of contingency and performance, the place of abstract painting and the place of the maker are all important questions to me. I am very concerned with history and how it needs to change. As an artist you're putting more stuff into the world and I'm very cognizant that if I'm going to put more stuff in the world, then it has to serve a purpose.

You keep asking "what if" questions. That is the way the trickster proceeds and I get a sense you assign yourself that role. You ask questions you don't know the answer to, and finding out the answers becomes the process of your artmaking. But how else does one go about it? Aren't we supposed to be answering these questions as we move through the world? There is this cheesy Tom Hanks movie from the late '90s called *Joe Versus the Volcano*. Near the end of the movie they are at the top of the volcano and Meg Ryan turns to Hanks and says, "We'll jump and we'll see." That's the way I hope to move through the world. We research and we read and we think about history and they are all extremely important. But in the moment when you are poised and about to execute something, you just have to have faith in everything that you've learned. It's just like in the movie; you get to see what happens after you jump. ■