

ART

Monthly

No.430, October 2019

Sarah Rapson: Sell The House Essex Street, New York, 8 September to 27 October

Never has the term ‘Romantic Conceptualism’ better suited an artist than it does Sarah Rapson (I’ll credit Jörg Heiser with coining the term in a 2002 piece for Frieze, though the tendency he identified has been around since the 1960s). Everything about ‘Sell The House’, Rapson’s first New York solo exhibition since 2012, bespeaks the fusion of self-conscious melancholy with hardheaded art-world nous. In each of the 19 works on view, which were made between 1997 and the present, the artist combines a fan’s naked idolisation of various modernist icons with an unapologetic tendency to mythologise her own life and career. Rapson exhibits a peculiarly English brand of lo-fi cool; while outwardly small and quiet, these paintings, drawings, collages, videos and audio works are infused with an understated confidence that gives the lie to their outwardly modest, fragile form.

London-born but a veteran of the late 1980s and 1990s New York scene - she enrolled in the Whitney Independent Study Program, toiled as Richard Prince’s studio assistant and made her solo debut at women-only gallery Trial Balloon - Rapson has lived for the past 15 years in a seaside town in Dorset ‘in a ropemaker’s cottage built the same year that Keats was born’. Such biographical details mesh perfectly with the artist’s approach, a switchback ride between smart and sweet. Rapson’s transatlantic life story is a consistent touchstone, too; several works are constructed around clippings from the *New York Times*, others are inscribed with dollar-to-pound exchange rates, and there are numerous references to American artists, such as Jasper Johns and Ad Reinhardt, alongside Brits like Bridget Riley.

At Essex Street, the opening work is also an early one. 1997’s (*Tell me what you want*) is a 16-minute audio recording of the artist repeating, deadpan but with increasing breathlessness, the tag line of the Spice Girls’ then-inescapable debut single, ‘Wannabe’. It made for

the perfect introduction to ‘Sell The House’, a rigorously minimal-conceptual treatment of a throwaway - and thoroughly English - slice of pop culture. *Sufficient Fortune*, a three-minute video from 2002, also leans on music, in this case a looping guitar riff and haunting vocal by Nick Drake (another quintessentially English and thoroughly romantic/romanticized performer) to blanket ambiguous, anti-climactic action in emotional atmosphere.



Sarah Rapson, *Untitled*, 1997

In several ragged-looking abstract paintings, Rapson fuses the straightforwardly material (or as she puts it, given the ingredients’ frequently humble status, ‘no material’) with art’s journalistic traces, producing a curious hybrid of erasure and memorial. *An Enduring*

Vision, 2018, for example, is a white slab, seemingly a Robert Ryman-esque exercise in pure paint on linen, but in fact it contains and conceals a (presumably contemporaneous) copy of the *Times* art section. *Classical Landscape*, 2011, is similarly stark, a crumpled black-and-white reproduction of a Claude Lorraine landscape torn from a book and masking-taped to a diminutive and slightly grubby white canvas. It might seem like a nihilistic gesture, a coffin nail for painting itself, but it functions too as entirely the opposite, a bittersweet memento of the time Rapson spent selling slides of the Baroque master's work during a stint at the British Museum.

Exploiting art's reportage and history as raw material, Rapson also reflects on its value, both monetary and cultural. She has long been in the habit of integrating auction results and gallery sales reports into her work, giving them a determinedly painterly treatment as if to neutralise their power and gesture towards other means of assessment and comparison, other systems within which art might operate. *One Thing I like about Zen*, 2008, is a collage of yellowed columns from *Times* reviews of Agnes Martin and Gordon Matta-Clark. The title quote stands out, the 'thing' that Martin appreciates being the fact that the religion 'doesn't believe in achievement. It doesn't think the way to succeed is by doing something aggressive'. The philosophical link with her own practice, its deliberate modesty, is plain enough.

In *Cathcart Hill*, 2000, the video that rounds out 'Sell The House', a conspicuously bewigged Rapson runs down the slope of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and into one of its galleries. The sequence is made confusing by repeated cuts that show her sometimes alone, at other times with a baby, and the mood is distinctly anxious. Is she late? Has she lost someone? Or is it the place itself that is the threat, the grandiosity of its architecture or the untouchable status of its contents? Rapson is in awe of the context in which she works, but devoted to it too, and determined to play her part.

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