

## POETS AND ARTFANS

Pujan Karambeigi on Sarah Rapson at Essex Street, New York



Sarah Rapson, "101 (Love is Everywhere)," 2001, Detail

The British artist Sarah Rapson began her career in the '90s as a painter, creating hung works that indulged in an aesthetics of the negative, a refusal to make something pictorial or pretty. Recently, Rapson exhibited a newer series of works in New York – a city she once lived in and left in 2004 – that included both paintings and video works, in which Rapson herself appears in disguise.

Editor and critic Pujan Karambeigi considers the legacy of Rapson's often self-destructive work, much of which now focuses on her departure from the Big Apple, and the idea of escape more generally. Who could blame Rapson for meditating on what it means to be "not there"?

Now in its eighth edition and having sold more than four million copies, H. W. Janson's canonical *History of Art* (1962) is one of those infamous textbooks that managed to exclude any mentioning of women artists over the course of its 571 pages. Synchronous to the celebrations of its fifth edition in 1997, Sarah Rapson produced *Untitled* (1997), which consists of the book's ripped out frontispiece, simply reading the authors name, and in a smaller font below, "with Dora Jane Janson." In addition, Rapson inserted a photogravure of one of Bridget Riley's semi-hallucinatory black-and-white Op-paintings, made around the time Janson's tome first hit the shelves.

These gestures might appear all too familiar to us today: turning an art-historical reference into the medium of one's practice, either to antagonize or identify with it. The strategy came to prominence in the post-Conceptual playbook of what could be called the "artfan" (Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and later Martin Kippenberger and Michael Krebber, among others).<sup>1</sup> An integral part of the globalized political and economic conundrum taking place in and outside the art world in the 1980s, the "artfan" rehearsed the dramatic monetary inflation of the time by unleashing the seemingly free-floating signifiers circulating between Cologne and New York.<sup>2</sup>

With *Untitled*, Rapson outplays her reminiscence. As much as the antagonism to Janson's masculinist art history is rather transparent, her level of identification is less so. Is it Riley's much-noted seasickness and skydiving experience that is visible in her Op art, in the tiny photogravure just barely perceptible, a kind of art-historical ghost? Or is her identification rather with Dora Jane Janson, the eminent art historian's wife whose name keeps being omitted because the "with" is ambiguous enough not to reach the status of co-authorship? Or, is it the almost blank page ripped out of the book and used as the vessel that transmits the message?

"A painter with real negative capability," Eileen Myles wrote in 1992 on Rapson's solo debut at the women-only gallery Trial Balloon during her brief tenure as poet-turned-art-critic for *Art in America*.<sup>3</sup> Having just published her own collection of poetry, *Not Me* (1991), Myles was uniquely suited to grasp the literary avenue beyond art history that Rapson pursued in her work. The reference is to John Keats's coinage "negative capability," which the English Romantic poet used

to describe a sculpting of language "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>4</sup> This is about the capacity to be somewhere between confusion and uncertainty, to articulate various points of view simultaneously, not to surrender to the dogma of a single method, instead providing highly nuanced ambiguity.

It is true that Rapson started her career as a painter, and the current exhibition "Sell The House," her first at Essex Street, showcases the results of the last two decades of work (she is known for destroying much of her output after exhibiting it). *Therefore on Every Morrow* (2015), named after a line from one of Keats's most famous poems, is part of a series of monochrome paintings: a white painted newspaper over stretched canvas, the highlighted illegibility appears like a comment on her earlier newspaper paintings, which Myles then delineated as "a small angry poem, savagely rewritten."<sup>5</sup> In *One Thing I Like about Zen* (2008), Rapson collaged a *New York Times* article on Agnes Martin's retreat from New York to New Mexico, ripping the newspaper reproduction of her canonical grid paintings in two so that top and bottom switched positions. In addition, the number of a hedge fund manager is written underneath and an article on the collectively organized Food project by Gordon Matta-Clark and Tina Girouard is pasted onto parts of Martin's article. Again, the antagonism to the hedge fund manager is much more pronounced than her alignment: Is Rapson dramatizing her own departure from New York in 2004, after almost two decades, by identifying with the "spiritual journey" the article attributes to Martin? Or is it Matta-Clark's famous sculptural splitting of the physical reality, rehearsed in ripping Martin's painting, that she wants to stage?



Sarah Rapson, "Cathcart Hill," 2000, film still

The slightly curved black canvas of *My Dress* (2004), the earliest painting in the show, makes the point most poignantly. At 48 inches long and 14 inches wide, its size could roughly match a black dress worn by Rapson: a painting as something you wrap around yourself, as a decoration of the self, an accessory to one's identity. On second glance, though, or seen from the side, the work turns out to actually consist of two joined canvases, thus breaking the one rule a dress is defined by – that it's a one-piece garment (otherwise it's a skirt). Why cut what is one in two? Why split the organic identity into two unequal parts to then reassemble them in a curve?

This is to say that not all works by Rapson manage to create this spliced experience, and thus expose the dangers of this *amour fou* for other people's art. *Ad Reinhardt Untitled (Black)*. 1960–66.

Oil on canvas. 60' x 60'. Photograph courtesy of the Jewish Museum, New York (2016) is a case in point. The title is appropriated from the catalogue page Rapson glued onto the canvas depicting the Ad Reinhardt work. With the texture of the canvas pushing through the printed painting, the work simply consumes the irony of aura versus reproducibility without producing much mystery; the transparency of its gesture exhausts itself in its art-historical momentum.

In fact, if Rapson is a painter, it's her videos that go furthest in their negative capability. *Sufficient Fortune* (2002), a three-minute looped video, seems to retell the failed liberation narrative of American sculpture in the long 1960s: A tiny silhouette steps warily through a seemingly endless landscape, never really daring to transgress into the infinite sky above. That same silhouette

is then observed walking on the edge of a long barrier, to finally be turned into a body walking along the walls of an office, an auditorium, and an exhibition space. What passes as Robert Smithson turns out to be Rapson wearing a wig; what appears to be an office turns out to be the Yale Art Department into which Rapson broke in illegally; what looks like On Kawara's *Today Series* (1966–2014) are in reality the still-packaged drawings for the exhibition Ellsworth Kelly, *Tablet: 1949–1973* (2002) at the Drawing Center. Are we stuck in the infinite regress of art history folded in on itself? The foreign element breaking the equation is the score of the video, the edited and restructured song *Know* (1972) by Nick Drake literally filling the entire exhibition space. In fact, the inclusion of the doomed romantic in 2002 was not so much about a nostalgic mining of 1960s archives as it was an explicit reference to the famous Volkswagen Cabriolet commercial from 1999 that used Drake's "very transporting" music to posthumously boost his album sales by more than tenfold, eventually earning him places in several greatest albums/musicians lists.<sup>6</sup>

Sure, all this is in some way about escape, about breaking free only to find oneself enclosed again. But why then all this dressing and splitting up, all this "passing as" and "breaking in," if in the end there is nothing but a closed door locking one in (or out)? "The muted white tones of the British artist's recent paintings bring to mind paper, bed linens, yogurt, and porcelain."<sup>7</sup> Am I completely derailed or did the anonymous one-sentence mention of Rapson's show in *New York Magazine* just turn into a poem? There is something contagious about these moments when Rapson starts editing references not to inflate their meaning and expose their arbitrariness but

to suspend perception of the present, when this tiny two-dimensional world starts spinning to transgress into a soft, semi-hallucination carrying you somewhere else, I am thinking while listening to Drake melting his baritone range with the acoustic guitar, reaching out to us one last time before his overdose from antidepressants: "You know that I love you/You know that I don't care/You know that I see you/You know I'm not there."

"Sarah Rapson: Sell The House," Essex Street, New York, September 8–October 27, 2019.

#### Notes

- 1 The expression goes back to the zine *Artfan*, run from 1991 to 1995 by Linda Bilda and Ariane Müller.
- 2 Jutta Koether first drew this connection in an article in which she voiced her realization that Kippenberger's "real weapon is inflation." See "Who is Martin Kippenberger?," in: *Artscribe International*, January/February 1989, p. 52.
- 3 Eileen Myles, "Sarah Rapson at Trial Balloon 2," in: *Art in America*, November 1992, p. 141.
- 4 John Keats, "Letter to George Keats. Sunday, 21 December 1817," in: Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005, p. 1351.
- 5 Eileen Myles, "Sarah Rapson at Trial Balloon 2," in: *Art in America*, November 1992.
- 6 Ron Lawner, "'Milky Way' is the First Volkswagen Ad to Launch on Web Sneak Preview on the Internet Prior to National Broadcast," in: *Volkswagen of America*, November 11, 1999.
- 7 "Gallery—Solos—57th Street Area," in: *New York Magazine*, January 9, 1995.