

“AMEN”

Domenick Ammirati and Paige K. Bradley on Sarah Rapson at Maxwell Graham, New York



“Sarah Rapson: The Second Show,” Maxwell Graham, New York, 2023, installation view

No review is an island. One often writes a text with a particular, though faintly outlined, readership in mind. Usually, that drafted piece is then the subject of a thorough dialogue with an editor, a sort of internal communication, from which some observations or arguments might be revised or redirected. For their contribution, Domenick Ammirati and Paige K. Bradley conceive their review as a conversation. Engaging with the work of Sarah Rapson, which is, incidentally, partly constructed of repurposed art coverage and reviews, the two critics reflect, among other things, on how much mediated knowledge, provided for example by a press release, the reviewer should possess when confronting a work.

PAIGE K. BRADLEY: You never want anything to end.

DOMENICK AMMIRATI: True – it’s my fear of death.

PKB: Is it the same for you with objects, this need for ongoingness?

DA: No.

PKB: It is for me.

DA: I’m not surprised. Are we talking about Sarah Rapson now?

PKB: I think we are.

DA: Her objects do seem very interested in the process of lasting.

PKB: They have this one-thing-after-another serial quality; even the surfaces are built up one layer after another. They accrete, with hints of something from below bulging out like a remnant – something buried but surviving.

DA: And there's the works' relationship to art history – there's duration literally under the surface, though I wouldn't have known if Maxwell didn't tell me.

PKB: Yes, but you don't need a guide or press release to find that out. A few different pieces in her show had bits of old text, like arts coverage from the *New York Times*. And that sedimentary layering has got something to do with time.

DA: That's what I'm saying.

PKB: But you could see that without being told.

DA: You knew that there were newspaper and magazine clippings – including a lot of art stuff – lurking under the surface of things?

PKB: Well, they were on top of the surface on some of them. The checklist had two with the paper's title incorporated: *new york times sutra / actual art* and *new york times sutra / islet / with transcript*. The reference becomes a forensic detail. If you see one where it's apparent, on top of the surface, then with the works that are more opaque in their layering then you start to think, "What's

underneath? More of the same, or ...?"

DA: The accretion is palpable, yes, but I'm not sure I would have immediately thought there was more material like that underneath. Maybe I'm just obtuse? But for me the uncertainty functioned positively.

PKB: I think if you're willing to spend time with something you can figure it out. I generally disagree with this idea that a work can have "too much to ask" of the viewer.

DA: Yes, but the works at Maxwell's were mostly pretty recalcitrant objects, these monochrome, elongated, plank-like structures ...

PKB: Were they really monochromes? I think of the monochrome as a painting that has an even surface, a stability. But the way these works lean, and how you can see the back of at least a few of them – the very first thing you see is the back of one through the gallery's window (*Untitled / blocks*). It's a sculptural object to me if you're also being given the back or if the premise of front and back is deemphasized. Each side was different. And so it's unstable as painting but filling out into sculpture.

DA: I don't think that their having sculptural aspects disqualifies them from being called monochromes. They're tablet shaped. Yes, she's trying to create an ambiguity or a tension around them. Can a sculpture be a monochrome? Probably, I think. But that's a separate question.

PKB: You're saying I'm splitting hairs.

DA: Yes.

PKB: That's funny – because the way the works look lined up, they look like splinters. They look like they're splintered apart from a whole, perhaps even hairs split from a mane.

DA: However you arrive at it, once you get this notion that they have all this information below the surface, I got to a question of how personal it is. Maybe my mind went in that direction because we live in a toxically autobiographical age. But here, when she's including an art review – we hope this one makes it into a work someday! – you have no idea if she's personally invested or not.

PKB: People talk about "the personal" in such an oddly limited way, as if personal experience were isolated from context. As if anyone's personal material wasn't also someone else's found material. At the beginning of the show, also by the window, taped to the wall, there's a copy of a photograph of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg at an opening. It's slightly crumpled. What I like about that is that you can read its inclusion as personal, because it could be something she could have had in her studio for decades. Or, she might have found it a week before her show.

DA: Did I tell you about the Rapson show at CCS Bard that ran concurrent with this one? The film that was in it, *Love Is a Rose*, was from 2003 but was deliberately made to look like it's from the 1970s – shot on Super 8 and transferred to DVD, soundtracked with a Neil Young song. The curator of the show, Liv Cuniberti, told me that Rapson calls the wig and outfit she wears in the footage her "seventies feminist disguise."

That little clipping of Johns and Rauschenberg is another example of how she invokes not just the past but art history. It puts the rest of the works at Maxwell's in dialogue with Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* or Johns's *White Flag* (1955), the flatbed picture plane, etc. They proposed questions she seems interested in: "Is it an object? Is it a painting? Where does it hang?" She's invoking all that and sexuality, too, by bringing in an image of them as a couple. It's another thing that I find impressive: her works are incredibly compressed.

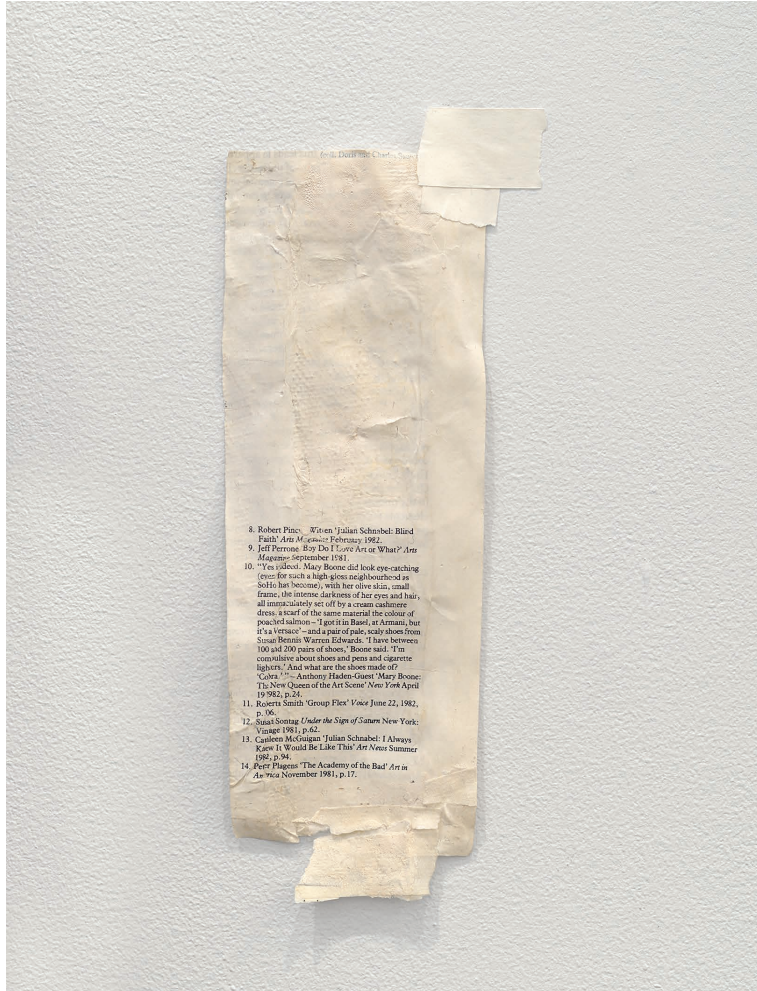
PKB: In terms of their scale? Or the way they're collating historical material into these white or off-white painted surfaces?

DA: They encode. I don't necessarily want to use a computer-science metaphor, but they contain a lot of information. One piece, *le smoking*, is made with ash from her fireplace, where she apparently burns old paintings among other things. There's so much that she's telling you, but she's not being particularly open about it. It's almost like a theater of compression.

PKB: The hint about what she's not telling seems related to what you said about sexuality – it's bit queer in an old-fashioned way. Coding, a little different from your word, *encoding*. "Coded" has become a very worn-out phrasing, but these do seem queer coded, in a "You get my drift?" way.

DA: I do still wonder how I would have responded to the work if I hadn't been given the spiel right after I started looking at it.

PKB: I discourage the spiel.



DA: You're a stronger person than I am.

PKB: But I'm not really one for being led. I am the kind of bitch who leads. And feel free to follow along, or not.

DA: What about the work that's a TV monitor with a couple of these paintings on top (my eternal soul / lent)?

PKB: I love that painting so much. I talked it up across town for a month.

DA: You called it a painting!

PKB: I didn't say I had an issue with calling it painting per se. It's the monochrome bit that bugs me – you're conflating!

I want to get back to this TV. Actually there were two canvases, leaning against the wall like the rest but perched on top of a large monitor essentially as part of a pedestal. It's the kind of monitor you only see in museums, usually for displaying old video art. It's a valuable piece of institutional infrastructure at this point, and

she's essentially taken one out of commission. You could see the unplugged power cord hanging pathetically down the back. I find this completely fucking punk rock.

DA: I really like that piece, too, in part because it's confusing. You don't know if you're supposed to wait for a video to come on. I didn't notice the cord.

PKB: In the naked city there's an alley behind a plinth, and the television is not plugged in.

DA: The piece creates this sense of ambiguity that I keep talking about. It's also a gesture of refusal, which makes me think about Martin Herbert's book *Tell Them I Said No* (2016).

PKB: Great book.

DA: Martin, if you read this, I wish I had written that book. Anyway, Rapson's whole show fits in with that paradigm of refusing to give you too much.

PKB: The works have a stance. They appeared like a kind of battalion to me, an army. A regiment, all standing for something.

DA: The thing I ultimately liked so much about her work is that you can turn each one around as an intellectual object and look at it from many different angles, the way we've been shooting through topics here. Most art kind of boils down to a point or two that people are trying to make. But she's juxtaposing density with restraint, which is another twist I really appreciate.

PKB: She plays with a perception of restraint, propriety. There's one work, *odette and her mother*, that includes a piece of paper listing footnotes from different writers and magazines, e.g. *New York*. One is an extended quote from Anthony Haden-Guest's 1982 profile of Mary Boone. Rapson cuts in the extra stuff – the gloss, the gossipy detail – into a show that superficially might seem austere sophisticated, or *above* such details.

DA: Should we talk about *le smoking* now? It's unusual in the show in that it's an elegant blue-black color; also, in a nice pun, it features literal ash from her fireplace. It's a fashion term, right?

PKB: *Le smoking* was Yves Saint Laurent's 1966 tuxedo for woman. Something made to ease a woman's entry into spaces where they would otherwise be shunned. Marlene Dietrich – queer icon! – is famously associated with such a look. Fashion was also moving toward leaner lines then, and Rapson's paintings are so narrow and elongated. They cut a figure. Accretion, yes, but little protuberance. It's a hint that cues the viewer to understand the works as *figures*, in multiple senses. They're poised, they pose. The textures of their surfaces have a tactile weave to them, whether they're linen or canvas, even with the paint coating them. And then with the text incorporated into them – you can't spell textile without text. I also like when she brings Daniel Buren into it with the archival photo of people carrying around his stripes via those contraptions on their backs (*Hombres-Sandwichs*, 1968). We've seen this photograph before, but the way Rapson deploys it I realize now that they're *wearing* the stripes.

DA: Her work is weird.

PKB: It's not so descriptive a word, "weird." This is TEXTE ZUR KUNST, we can do better!

DA: We live in a hype glut. Maybe the best thing to do is call something "interesting." Calling something interesting is more interesting than saying something is brilliant at this point.

PKB: If you just say "brilliant," that's dead in the water.

DA: I feel like the more tepid response, or seemingly tepid, is more worthwhile in today's semiotic economy.

PKB: Maybe a good question for Rapson's works is, "Do we want to see them again?"

DA: I would like to see them again, every so often in the course of my life, in some different configuration.

PKB: The first time I saw her work was the one piece in the "Shaker Material Culture" show that Maxwell did in 2019. On my first encounter with it, I saw her work displaced out of time.

DA: Remember that one little square one on the wall, behind the TV?

PKB: I do because it was installed above eye level, not even necessarily meant to be seen. It seems to me like there's a consensus now that art should meet people where they're at. I am against this.

DA: You're making it sound so religious! Maybe the art shouldn't be on a high pedestal.

PKB: We believe in Sarah Rapson though, don't we?

DA: We do.

"Sarah Rapson: The Second Show," Maxwell Graham, New York, April 8–May 20, 2023.



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