

ARTFORUM

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Sadie Benning's Watercolors
By Alex Bacon, Sadie Benning



View of "Sadie Benning: Daily Forecasts: October 28th, 2020 – September 6th, 2021," 2026, Maxwell Graham, New York.

In their diminutive "Daily Forecast" works on paper, on view at Maxwell Graham in New York through February 21, Sadie Benning, who is known for their work with experimental video, has produced an introspective series of koan-like watercolors. This started as a psychic exercise to pass time during the Covid lockdowns of 2020, but the practice has continued to occupy Benning since. The watercolors evoke associations with specific words (which remain undisclosed to the viewer) that the artist would channel intuitively at the start of a given day. Benning used these words to generate online image searches, introducing algorithmic mediation into the mix. Scrolling through the results, Benning then selected a diverse set of reference images and turned these into digital collages on an app on their phone, finally executing them on paper through the highly personal and painstaking medium of watercolor. As in their constructed paintings, cut from shaped pieces of wood painted with layers of Aqua-Resin and pieced back together, Benning pushes the medium of watercolor against itself. Rather than allowing its typical lightness, Benning layers their brushstrokes purposefully so as to establish new kinds of relationships, both pictorial and material. In doing so, they create a kind of density that aligns with memories and psychic impressions. Benning sat down with me in their Bushwick studio in the icy wake of a major blizzard to discuss the process behind these works, and how they sit within Benning's practice more broadly.

—Alex Bacon



Sadie Benning, *Daily Forecast November 1st, 2020*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 6 ¾ x 4 ¼".



Sadie Benning, *Daily Forecast November 2nd, 2020*, 2020, watercolor on paper, 6 ¾ x 4 ¼".

When I started making the “Daily Forecasts,” it was during Covid, when we were all locked at home. First I made digital mock-ups on my phone, so they weren’t tangible in a physical way. I tried different scale shifts for them, but what felt the best was 4 x 6”, which is like a photographic print, or a postcard. It’s close to a head, in a way: the space inside the head. The finished watercolors have an analog read to them; technology isn’t what you’re thinking of when you’re looking at one. I didn’t want them to feel digital in that way. I was finding images from a lot of different time periods and merging them together. So if anything, I think the watercolor form has this way of making a more even playing field. There is an immediacy with watercolor that I would even compare to making videos where, when you turn a camera on and you record, there’s something instant and implacable that’s happening. With watercolor, you put the paint down and, within a minute, it’s dry.

There’s this hybridity going on that’s really important to me. Even when I make larger sculptural paintings, people sometimes think they’re ceramic or made out of leather—the form is hard to distinguish or categorize. And yet there is always a weird transference of information that happens through looking at an object: You make something and you put it on a wall and then someone sees it and they feel something that you imagined without telling them. The process of making those larger paintings has a little bit of an assembly-line aspect to it. They’re cut apart and put back together; I don’t see the final image until it’s completely done, because I glue it face down and then pick it up—the last thing I see is the finished composition. Whereas with the watercolors, all I’m doing the entire time is looking at it and making it come into being. So there’s a really different reality to the process, which I like.

I like setting up systems where I can create parameters and experiment within them. I think it comes from making videos and music, from using machines. A camera, or a sequencer . . . these machines have a framework—limitations—you have to fill them with information in order for them to speak. I am always in dialogue with the tool I am speaking through; there is always a call-and-response.

“Sadie Benning: *Daily Forecasts: October 28th, 2020 – September 6th, 2021*” is on view through February 21, 2026, at Maxwell Graham, New York.