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art:21

Centerfield | Embracing the Cliché: An Interview with Michelle Grabner



Michelle Grabner, "DRAFT," Installation view, Autumn Space, 2013. Courtesy Autumn Space.

Michelle Grabner exhibited at Autumn Space last month. Her show, *DRAFT*, ran the gamut of Grabner's practical, visual, and material practice. A black and white print of two San Francisco 49ers hung in a frame by the front desk near a round, black field painting of white dots. One side of the grand warehouse windows were dressed with larger-than-life red and white gingham curtains. Across from this hung a white gessoed painting and beside that a too-large-to-be-casual Post-it Note doodle adhered to the wall. A fifth long and heavy-looking sculpture of wood and cement lay diagonally across the floor. This last work was produced by Grabner and her husband Brad Killam. The two have been working collaboratively for many many years and the piece supplied a grounding, perpendicular line amongst otherwise vertical planes. In addition to being a painter and writer, Grabner is a professor and chair of painting at the School of the Art Institute. She co-curates exhibitions at The Suburban and Poor Farm with Killam, exploring the

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potential in rural and suburban curatorial sites. She is represented by Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, and will co-curate the 2014 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Whether operating as a teacher or facilitator, or as a painter, printer, collaborator, and sculptor, Grabner returns again and again to marginalized and overlooked frontiers for aesthetic inspiration, culling a minimalist sensibility from the banal pattern of picnic table place mats, gessoed cloth onto a canvas, white dots in a black field, or black pixelation on a white print. By juxtaposing scale and material she tills a subtle American vernacular, and by this constellation of works explores the pursuit of happiness.



Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam. "Untitled," 2013. Wood and concrete. Courtesy Autumn Space.

Caroline Picard: I want to ask you about collaboration, the when and how of it. When I was at Autumn Space looking at *Untitled* (2013)—the large wood and concrete sculpture that crosses over the ground of the gallery—it struck me that this piece was a collaborative effort between you and Brad Killam. It has such a striking materiality. It's so heavy looking, and seems to ground the whole show. I thought it was interesting given that you also work so closely together on *The Suburban*, and *The Poor Farm*—what are also unusual and very physical platforms for art. I guess what I'm trying to ask about is the materiality of collaboration, especially your collaborating with Killam. How do you decide to collaborate? How do you define that medium? And is there a relationship between the wood and concrete piece and the curatorial art spaces you run together?

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Michelle Grabner: When Brad and I finished our MFA degrees in Chicago we moved to Milwaukee, leaving our colleagues and the discourse we came to depend on in graduate school behind. It was the early '90s and we had a young family so Brad and I started collaborating under the moniker of CAR (Conceptual Arts Research). Again, let me underscore that this was the early '90s and the smack of "identity" was inescapable. So in addition to our individual painting practices, we started making work about our family, examining its social dynamics as pressed through the geeky political writings of Maxine Greene, Trinh T. Minh, Homi Bhabha, etc. The CAR work was readily received and we mounted exhibitions at White Columns, Chicago's Uncomfortable Spaces, Richard Heller, LA, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and All Girls, Berlin in a very short period of time. Milwaukee was the perfect incubator for us. Here we became friends with Felix Gonzalez Torres (MAM hosted his first museum exhibition), the artist Nick Frank, and curator Peter Doroshenko. But once we moved back to Chicago in 1997 (settling in Oak Park for the public school) we immediately launched The Suburban, and that collaborative effort soon replaced the family-focused work that defined our Milwaukee years. However, in 2007 when our youngest kid turned two, Brad and I started making "things" together again. But this time the work is built around formal ideas and the everyday. You are right to identify the material effects that we are investigating. The large-scale manipulation of found materials are distinctly a two-person operation: two middle-aged bodies arranging, stacking, and cobbling together common things like kindergarteners. But instead of Fröbel wooden blocks we build with the cast-off materials and residue from our life that is now split between Chicago and rural Wisconsin.



Michelle Grabner. "Untitled," 2011. Flashe and black gesso on canvas. Courtesy Autumn Space.

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CP: I remember reading about a show you had at Green Gallery in Milwaukee about a year ago. It was the first time that I'd seen images of your gingham paintings and I got so excited, thinking about the transition between your black tondo paintings and your subsequent transcription of gingham on canvas. Can you talk about how that transition occurred to you?

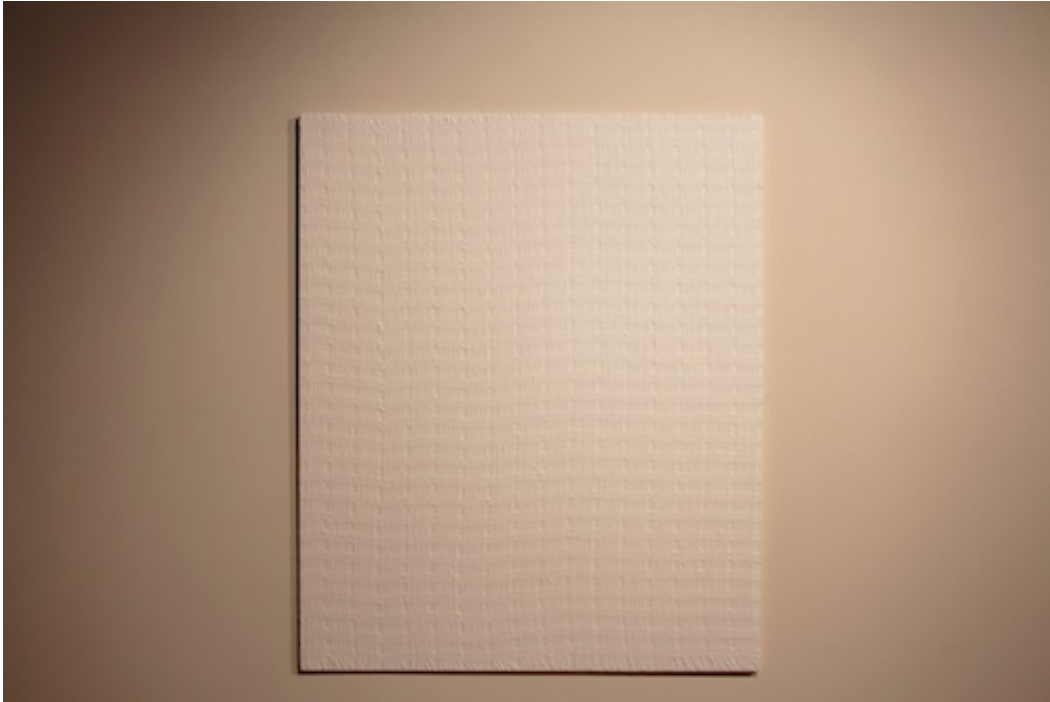
MG: That is a perfect follow-up question. I started making gingham gouache paintings when we moved to Milwaukee now over 20 years ago. My painting then was comprised of re-articulating the backdrops to my modest household complete with two young children and a husband. Gingham; paper towel patterns; crocheted blankets; they were the subjects of my painting for many years. It wasn't until 2003 that I finally left domestic references behind searching for less-referential fields of pattern and leading to the black and white Archimedes spiral dot paintings. Not surprisingly, this shift also corresponded with a two-year marital separation with Brad. So to your question, I am actually returning to the domestic, albeit with a very different relationship to these signifiers. Now those patterns and material references are much more symbolic than it was in the '90s. They no longer reflect the reality of our household economy or my daily relationship to little children. To be perfectly honest, a part of this re-examination reflects my desires for a smaller life, a predictable life. The gingham paintings are also a head-on embrace of the cliché, the big, beautiful, and all too-general idea that is both over used yet sturdy in its unfailing predictability.

CP: Can you talk about the way you play with painting as a site of translation? I had a wonderful moment when I saw your large, long gingham curtains—it occurred to me as a further transcription, twice removed. It seemed like you had already appropriated a traditionally iconic, domestic kitchen print, and then applied that to the canvas. Seeing the curtains in the gallery, the way they felt too big to be domestic, hanging on one window alone, and obviously in an art space—to me it felt like you had pulled the pattern out of the canvas again. In other words that there was a second translation—like someone translating something from, say, French into Chinese and then back into French. Even though we end with a curtain, the curtain feels different.

MG: Yes. You hit it on the head. And to push the pliability of the cliché even further, the gingham's redundant and indiscriminate overuse is not a condition of meaninglessness. To the contrary, as it migrates through time and slips into different contexts, the cliché underscores that fact that language itself undergoes constant renewal. Importantly, it also reaffirms that invention is not always necessary for new meaning. I think (I hope), for example, that my interest in clichés runs parallel with Kenneth Goldsmith's uncreative writing conceit.

So back to your question regarding painting as a site of translation: Indeed, this is exactly how I understand my painting. As a concept, translation is slow, boring, and methodical. Inevitably any transliteration of a found pattern like gingham, or even the re-articulation of simple geometries will yield a compelling understanding of the limitations of the material world and the principles that shape it. I say, "hats-off" to those painters who share their expressive genius and witty imaginations with us, but those clichés I find to be the most uninteresting and vacuous of all.

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Michelle Grabner. "Untitled," 2012. Weaving and gesso on panel. Courtesy Autumn Space.

CP: How do you think about texture? There's so much texture in the wood and concrete piece, or in *Untitled* (2012)—the weaving and gesso on panel piece: and the textures between those pieces really speak to one another, I think. Or the way the gingham paintings' texture ties in with the gingham curtain texture. But then too—the wall painting, *Morning Afternoon*, of the flashe and black gesso on canvas painting, and the silkscreen, these also supply a texture...I just want to know how you think about it, if it's an accident of your process, or if you deal with it at the fore of your mind?

MG: The material world always asserts itself in visual translation, impacting any hand-produced, re-rendering of the original source. This is important because materiality indexes both the process of translation and the found image. But it is worth saying that I am not compelled to seamlessly master the transposition of found patterns into painting or found images into uniform screenprints. Lately, we have this irksome habit in the art world of artists earnestly opining that they want to make work that "slows down the viewer." My jaw clinches-up in cynical paralysis even as I type those words. Instead, I am interested in the pragmatics of working within my means and incorporating the physical limitations in the process of working. The intentional "slowing-down" so I can have a meaningful exchange with the viewer (and I mean "exchange" critically) is not my intent. The texture, topography, and material effect evidenced in the work is indeed profound, but it reveals the rate and tempo of its making. There is no intentional "slowing down" in the process, no pandering to the viewer. Simply, the work's graceless touch is a reflection of translation and re-articulation as a necessity and as a process. I have no desire to get "good" at, to "fabricate" or to "dematerialize." I only want to work.