

These paintings are often even more modest in scale than her previous work. They have odd titles like “Good News” that seem designed to convince you of something, to make you feel good. But they don’t. Or, should I say, there seems to be a feeling of unease, a suspicion that something besides just happiness lies here. Can one escape the question “good news for whom?” These paintings, with their industrialized armature, tend towards a more instrumental logic that squeezes in on and limits possibility. Happiness seems to be gained at the expense of leaving the material world behind. However, if one looks closely, the paintings are not mechanically perfect. They are made with a well-trained hand using an imperfect process. The dots of acid-yellow spray paint are larger here, smaller there. The weave of the fabric doesn’t line up

perfectly with the edges of the painting, bringing back the indexical representation (there is something that lies beyond the painting, namely, more fabric, if nothing else). The material reference is still there, not entirely subsumed by light and its metaphor.

There is happiness after all, but not the happiness that shines out falsely from a surface you see at first glance, without really looking. These paintings contain a warning, even a political allegory, if you will. Logic is a tool, not the armature on which the world is structured. Foisted on the material world indiscriminately, logic can cause endless damage. “Good news” is best measured broadly, and materially, in the well-being of human bodies, not only in the close register to an ideal.

—Aaron Van Dyke

Michelle Grabner
paintings

/

Barbara Heath
weavings

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Michelle Grabner/Barbara Heath

Barbara Heath's weavings are technically exquisite works creating everyday utilitarian pieces. Tea towels, table linens, objects made for practical use. However, hers is an aesthetic exploration. The process of the creation is more important than the acquisition of the resulting useful object.

My first reaction to Michelle's paintings was oddly comforting and they evoked a sense of domesticity. I learned they were created by

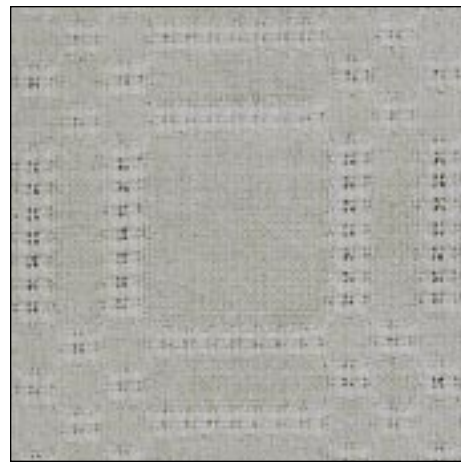
stretching blankets over boards, spraying paint through the spaces in between the fibers, and filling in the resulting pattern by brush. They are a sort of deconstruction (or maybe an expansion) of an everyday utilitarian object.

I think this is an interesting pairing of work and I hope you enjoy the show.

—Peg Brown

The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful

If one were to continue Clement Greenberg's Modernist logic, the historical trace he makes from Pollock to Noland, painting would sink into its own surface, into the weave of the canvas. While in graduate school a friend of mine once brought this to my attention saying that ikat weaving (a practice of selectively dyeing threads before weaving and then carefully lining them up on the loom to create the



Barbara Heath, untitled weaving (detail), 2002.

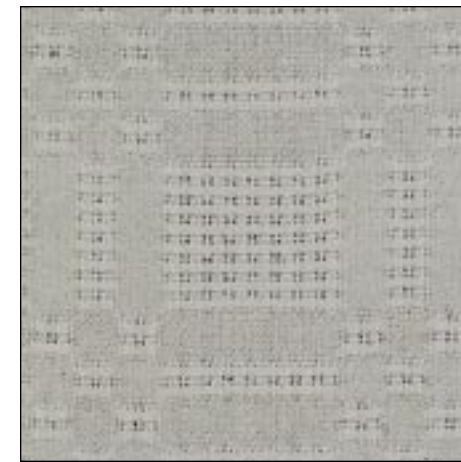
desired pattern) was the perfect Greenbergian painting. The irony is that ikat weaving in various forms has been practiced in many parts of the (non-Western) world—for example in India at least as far back as the 12th century—and is thus anything but what is traditionally considered Modern. Here lies some of the precarious terrain in the logic of recent art and criticism.

These two artists were brought together because of their work's (perhaps tangential) similarities in form. Heath works in traditional weaving; Grabner's practice is contemporary painting. It is not only a mischievous extension of Greenberg's theories of Modern painting that allow one to see fiber arts as potentially modern; quilts have also been seen as one possible inspiration for Modern abstract painting. Grabner is known for using domestic fabrics as models for her paintings. Both artists make work that is not just labor intensive, but filled with fine detail. It is this fine brushing against the weave, if you'll excuse the pun, that I find interesting.

Grabner's paintings have remained more or less stark and light in tone, but over the last few years an important and somewhat surprising change has taken place in her work. Her paintings became well known for their references to the domicile—blankets, bedspreads, colanders, and even mosquito netting (the domestication of the "natural"). There was a certain self-conscious contradiction between these references and their simultaneous reference to Minimalism through the austere articulated surface of the

paintings. This was commonly seen as a domestication of Minimalism or, conversely, bringing domesticity to Minimalism. The latter reading is not so far off from some of the more nuanced readings of Minimalism itself that saw it as an encounter with the bodily (as opposed to a literal reading of the surface as a purely anti-aesthetic gesture).

Domesticity, the vernacular technology of habitation, was brought literally to the surface of these paintings. A blanket would be laid on the surface of the canvas and paint sprayed through it, leaving its indexical trace on the canvas. Grabner then went back in and systematically filled in the traces with enamel paint (or in some cases, flocking). This, along with her paper weavings, also had domestic allu-



Barbara Heath, untitled weaving (detail), 2002.

sions in their recalling of children's crafts.

There was a further contradiction within this earlier work, between its abstractness as a painting and its realism as a surface via the trace of the material that served as its armature. The pattern of the painting was an abstract one, never forming a narrative or picture (or should I say "depiction," though it too has

its implications). Yet there are also various realisms lurking on the surface. The indexical is always linked, however tenuously, to realism. The fabric faithfully left its trace on the canvas as it was being used as a stencil (as a lens bends light to its will to form a photograph). Furthermore, Grabner accurately re-renders the pattern with paint applied by brush. This is not a conventional, or illusionistic realism, but a covering-up/revealing, overly literal (one might say mockingly literal) realism. A realism that makes the painting real, that ironically turns it back into an object, a Minimalist-looking thing.

This loop was further repeated in some of these paintings. In them, the fabric used as a stencil forms irregular arches and curves that want to resolve themselves into snow-covered hills and valleys. It's an evocative metaphor, relived almost nightly during the winter months. The thermostat in our house turns down to 60 degrees at night. When I go to bed it is quite cold and I race against this cold, undressing quickly and diving under the heavy covers. As I start to warm up, as I start to relax, it always seems as if I am barely staving off the harsh weather; utterly comfortable, but tenuously so, with little between me and the

brittle, unbearable cold. And I think of these paintings, both made from the things that stave off this cold, and evocative of that which is kept at bay, the snow covered hills just outside the window.

In Grabner's new paintings, all this is gone. There is the same light palette to her paintings, the same softness. Yet they have changed utterly, dissolved, vaporized into a spectrum of pastel light. The method remains similar, but the domestic fabrics have been replaced with an industrial one. Now paint is sprayed through fiberglass cloth. The indexical is almost completely lost in the meaningless regularity of the fabric (like light pouring directly onto film, or better, a lens pointed at a blank wall). Yet there is variation. The spray paint used is an acidic yellow, almost yellow-green. The small squares of brush-applied paint run through a spectrum—sometimes full, sometimes partial—of pale color, from the center to the edge following the rectangular shape of the painting. This reference to light thrusts these paintings back into the abstract, away from the material world. (There is a curious counterpoint in one painting that contains salmon-colored tones that seem to aim toward a pinky-white skin tone.)

