



SARAH CAIN

INTERVIEW BY ANN FRIEDMAN // PORTRAIT BY DAVID BROACH



“I COULD MAKE SOMETHING OUT
OF WHATEVER YOU GIVE ME.
LIMITATIONS ARE A GOOD THING.”

I MET THE ARTIST SARAH CAIN IN HER STUDIO IN Los Angeles where she’s completing work for upcoming museum shows—at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and at the Contemporary Art Museum of Raleigh—plus a solo show at Honor Fraser gallery in LA. We had a rambling conversation about what inspires her work, how she manages her career and what it’s like to be a woman in the art world, all the while nibbling on fresh raspberries and dark chocolate with sea salt. It was just as incredible as it sounds.

Ann Friedman: You’re showing so much work over the next few months. How is it all related?

Sarah Cain: The last time I did a solo show with my gallery in LA was 2012, and that show was called *Freedom is a Prime Number*. I feel like the best paintings from that show are now these new paintings—they come from that. It’s microscopically fine-tuning. There’s a seamlessness in blending weird materials together. I’ve started doing these object-canvas pieces. That’s a new thing, and it’s directly from the works on site that had furniture in them. It gets a little fuzzy talking about it without seeing the history of it all.

What’s exciting for you about these upcoming museum shows?

San Diego’s a cool show because it’s the first in a new series they’re doing where they invite an artist, and then the artist also gets to curate from the museum’s collection. So I got full access to their archive. The first booklet they gave me had six artworks on each page, and it took me eighteen pages until I got to the first woman in the collection. That was really disturbing.

You think they would be embarrassed about that and at least put some of the women near the front.

It was probably alphabetical. There was one artist I really wanted, Beatrice Wood, who’s a ceramicist from Ojai.

I bought myself one of her works because I couldn’t find one, which was really exciting, though also disgusting to see how cheap it was. She made it in 1968, and it was cheaper than some of mine, which is just fucking sad. But it’s this amazing piece she made and kept her whole life.

So, did you go buy it from her personally?

Oh, she’s dead. She lived to be 105. She said the secret was younger men, dark chocolate and art books. She dated Marcel Duchamp and they were also collaborators. She was just this wild character. And this other woman I met, who’s still alive, named Regina Bogat, was overshadowed by Alfred Jensen, her husband, 35 years her senior. So I put both Jensen and Regina in the show. The museum had this amazing Jensen print of a mystic vagina.

Will this all be shown alongside your work?

I get to hang it however I want. I picked three things from the collection, three things from the world, and then there’s seven of mine.

Do you try to mix up the size and scale of your work?

I work on tons of things at once. The installations are off-site, so usually after that, I come back and ground myself with smaller works on paper. It’s hard. I used to think it was so romantic to live in a hotel for a month, but now I’m over it [Laughs].

When did you decide you were over it?

Probably a few years ago when I was like, oh, it’s totally killing my personal life to be out this much. It just throws everything off.

But you must have to do some traveling and networking.

I do tons of it. And I’ve gotten much better at it. Because I used to just shut down, and the class issue is huge for me because I don’t come from money. Figuring out how to



deal with that has been tough. But I wouldn't be where I am without the richest people.

You make a real living.

It's amazing. It's freedom. It's rare to be able to just be working in the studio every single day, and when you have your economic freedom, you can do anything. Although people would see my current house and still think I live like a homeless person. The gas company flagged the heater and it still hasn't been fixed, you know?

Which is less dramatic in LA than in other cities, but still.

I'm still not living in a mansion. But I get to do what I want. I'm my own boss, which is huge. Currently I have three galleries. You're still the boss, but you have to negotiate. Each gallery has five people that are emailing you every day. I think a lot of people lose sight of how much work it really is to be an independent artist.

You're a businesswoman.

I didn't understand that at all in the beginning. I consciously was very much against capitalism and commercialism and making money. There was just a shift that happened at a certain age where I was like, oh my god, I can't die poor and homeless.

Was the work you were making affected by that shift in thinking too?

I would never have made canvases like those [gestures to a large canvas on the wall]. That, to me, is just the worst size. It's what a collector wants. But if I can make it and still be super excited by it, that's just great. I like to work against challenges.

In the earliest years of your career, how did you get by?

I did weird jobs. For a time I worked at an organic farm two days a week just for trade in produce. I had a really amazing older couple that let me live in their schoolhouse rent-free. It was really living on the edge. My ex got this squat in Brooklyn and I remember we took a mattress out of

the dumpster, and he was like, this is gonna be funny and romantic in ten years. But it isn't. It's so gross to me still!

Are you still proud of the work you made during that time?

It's awesome work, just early work. It's definitely the foundation of what I'm doing currently, but the work is so much better now. The more you fine-tune your vocabulary, the better it turns out. Also, it's not documented that well, either. It's pre-digital camera, from the end of the '90s. I was 21 to 24. Recently I did a show in London where they took over a brutalist car park. I got 7,000 euros to go there and do that, which is so different. And I stayed in a fancy hotel, and had support. A lot of my artist friends are still working day jobs, and it's a bummer because they deserve more. It's fucked up—every five or ten years, I see more people get edited out.

You mean not included in books and in shows and on lists?

Yeah, that's just such bullshit. What I think is interesting is if you go back to old issues of *Artforum*, there are people who were always getting reviews, and you don't even know who the fuck they are anymore. For big museum shows, they make these survey books that pick artists, and you think, "these are the people." And they're not. Success is funny because you have to have the skills to manage it. Some people who broke early are not doing that well now. They got too much attention and it pigeonholed their work. You have to really keep focused on not letting outside influences like money or success affect what you're making, and I've always worked really hard to do that.

So what does affect what you make?

My personal life. It's really about who I'm hanging out with, what I'm reading, what I'm listening to, how I'm growing. They're abstract paintings, but they are very much about things. My palette has stayed the same wherever I am, which I think is more tied into my emotional state. The work is a way of pulling me through things. If I change location, things shift a lot.

Are you ever tempted to try to explain it?

I do sometimes. I tell people the truth if they ask. But I also feel like it's limiting. The title of this painting—and it's going to be the title of the San Diego show—is *Blue in Your Body, Red When it Hits the Air*, which is about blood, but also it's about a relationship a long time ago with someone. It's a really long personal story that's super heavy, and it's way too much information for a stranger to know about me. The titles have multiple meanings. Sometimes they're just notations in my brain so I can remember them, because I make so much work.

What is your speed? How long did it take you to make all this work in the studio?

I've been working on all this for a year. There's a big painting I just tucked away that happened in two days. But sometimes things sit. There's one I made in three days, but it's been sitting for five months because I can't figure out the next thing. You have this window to catch a painting before you lose it, and you have to stay in that same state to



finish it, or get back to the state you were in when you last touched it. Sometimes I nail a big painting in a day, but then it's like, whoa, that was so easy, do I trust it? And as I've gotten older, I'm starting to learn it's fine. A day is actually 36 years, because that's how old I am.

Do you keep much of your work for yourself?

An older artist gave me good advice, early on, to keep one thing from every show for myself. Later, if your work goes on the market, it's the smartest investment in yourself, to have some of your work from every period. So I do keep things.

How did you learn about the way the business side of the art world works?

I was lucky because the first gallery I started with is the top tier of professionalism. The downside is that they treat me so well it's been hard to work with younger galleries. There's been a big shift in the art world. Now most business happens at art fairs. Everything is changing all the time. A lot of my friends don't even know what the gallery should be

previous spread
Modern
Mixed-media on site
London, England
2011

opposite left
Witchcraft
Broom, acrylic, beads, wire, sea shells,
and glitter on canvas
48" x 79"
2015

opposite right
Love Seat
Mixed-media
2015

above
Untitled (The Nineties)
Acrylic, string, and beads on canvas
48" x 60"
2015



doing for them. I think people think I'm difficult because I expect so much. But people don't know how to ask for what they need. That's been a learning experience. It's also been a recent learning experience for me to learn how to talk a little nicer, because I'm so direct. If a woman's direct, people automatically go to calling you a bitch or thinking you're difficult when you're just doing your job.

No one likes it when a woman demands better.

I remember when I had my first meeting with my New York gallery, and I said, "Well, it is a business." And the gallerist said, "I'm glad you said that. Because everyone pretends like it's not." [Laughs] It is so business. But the purity of what happens in the studio is a whole different thing, and that's why I'm really there.

Do you try to keep a mental barrier?

I do. Sometimes that can't happen. But it fucks me up to be doing emails in the studio. I don't take phone calls, usually, in the studio. Now, getting ready for a show, the gallery wants to start bringing collectors through.

Has there ever been a moment when you haven't wanted to be an artist?

No. I had a friend, who I'm not that tight with anymore, and our careers were parallel. Then she sort of got this break, one of those things where I felt, "I should have gotten that." And she got it. Recently she called me and said, "I don't know if I want to be an artist." And I was like, "WHAT!?" I think I would fucking die. I would lose my mind. There's nothing else I can do.

Did you go to art school?

I dropped out of high school, went to community college, then I transferred to San Francisco Art Institute. I also went to Parsons School of Design in Paris, so I did a bit in Europe. Then I did my MFA at UC Berkeley. I thought I would go to Yale and that would have been the real academic route, but I kept getting waitlisted and I just got pissed off and went to Berkeley because it was free. That was the smartest thing I ever did. It was just two years of being paid to make art, and that's when I went from waitressing to getting a gallery. A lot of my friends are seriously in debt from school.

Do you ever get jealous of or feel competitive with other artists?

Maybe it's also because I'm further along in my work and in myself, but I don't feel that anymore. I've had some students recently who want it so bad, and I get it. I get it even more being a woman and trying to figure out all the posturing that happens. You have to figure out how to control your sexuality and be smart about it because that's going to affect you differently than if you're a man.

Have you ever felt like you have to mediate your sexuality?

There's so many times I'm like, "You cannot fuck that person," because *you can't*. It's just not allowed. Sit on it. I don't regret anything. But there are a couple of my peers that I was in relationships with where I really wish I hadn't.

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Do you ever work out your thoughts and ideas in a journal or a sketchbook? Or does it all happen in the studio?

It all happens here, although I do write. I used to write poetry and put out these little books, and I haven't done it too much recently. I do sometimes put writing out around the shows. It's cryptic, weird writing. So I don't know if it's helpful to anyone besides me. I don't plan paintings, even the big works on site. It's an attack-and-resolve thing.

You must have to plan ahead, to a certain degree, to bring certain materials.

I usually do a site visit, and then it just gets to a point where I have to tell them what paints to buy. It's sort of just shooting from the hip. Now I've done so many that I know the basics, although I could make something out of whatever you give me. Limitations are a good thing.

Is it easier when you have limitations or total control?

I don't think I ever have total control. I started doing works on site because I was a control freak and I couldn't deal with commercialism or selling, so they were a way to abandon

control. You don't know what's going to happen in a site. You don't know when you're going to get kicked out of a building. And when you're working with a museum, you don't have control. You have to negotiate so much bullshit that it's astonishing how many times you hear "No." Maybe I have control over the paintings, but I feel like they talk to me. They show me more than I show them.

How does your site-specific work differ from the work you show in galleries?

The works on site are so big that they have this macho quality. A lot of people get off on the idea of my works on site being so big and so wild, and that I'm a very petite woman. That's some deeper social shit. I don't know that they would assume a woman made them, necessarily, just based on how big they are.

How do you feel about the label "woman artist?"

It really depends on my day. Has a man pissed me off while I'm walking into the building? Has somebody catcalled me? Then I'm a woman artist. My work comes so much out of

previous spread
Untitled
 Installation view
 Contemporary Art Museum, Houston
 2013

left to right
Marc
 Oil pastels and acrylic on canvas
 72" x 104"
 2015

Mint Green X
 Acrylic, feathers, beads, and
 string on canvas
 72" x 104"
 2015

Hey Babe Take a Walk on the Wild Side
 Mural view at LAND
 (Los Angeles Nomadic Division) HQ
 West Hollywood, California
 2014

my mental and my physical state, and I am a woman. But I do think that it can be a limitation. A lot of times, I'm the only woman who's traveling with a bunch of dudes. And it's different. Like, I don't get invited to the bar after. So those things, it's tricky. It pisses me off when people say things like, my colors are "girl" colors. There's been this thing haunting me where people say my work is about girlhood or childhood. Nostalgia is a disease, and my work is not nostalgic. It's very much about present-tense.

Where do you want your work to end up?

I want it in museums, which I would have never said before. In museums or with collectors who have temperature-control. I want it with people that know how to take care of art. I love the idea, like how I just got that Beatrice Wood, of other artists being able to have things, or people who know me well. I want it to outlive me.

Do you think about the kind of older lady you want to be?

I had this dinner a couple years ago with Rebecca Morris, who's an LA painter who's really awesome, Amy Sillman, a

New York Painter, and Mary Heilmann, a New York painter. And all of us were ten years apart. I love all of them. They're all fantastic painters, and I had to try to not be too nervous. It was so inspiring to look around. It was like a clock. Oh, here's ten years, here's ten more years. Fierce fucking women. Probably, most people would say, a table full of very difficult women. But it was just so inspiring. I can't think of too many times in my life when I've actually been shown a window of possibilities for what the future can look like.



Sarah Cain will open three solo shows in 2015: May 8, 2015 at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in La Jolla, May 30, 2015 at Honor Fraser in Los Angeles, and October 1, 2015 at CAM Raleigh.

For more information about Sarah Cain, visit sarahcainstudio.com

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