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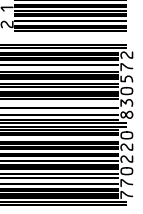


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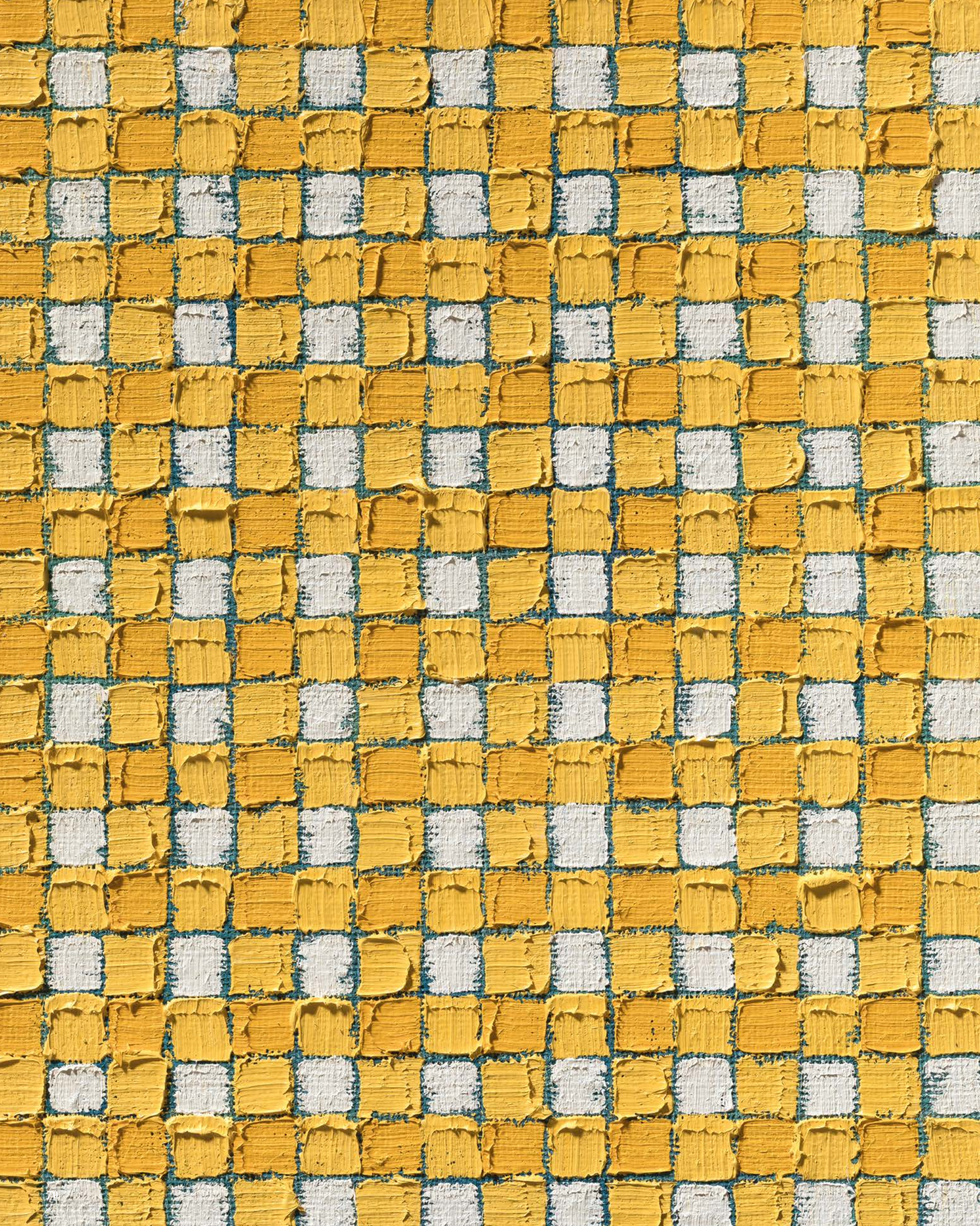
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MICHELLE GRABNER

# CUTTING NEW CLOTH

Michelle Grabner's fabric paintings unravel  
Abstraction's macho legacies – one thread at a time.

FEATURE *by* CHLOÉ WOLIFSON

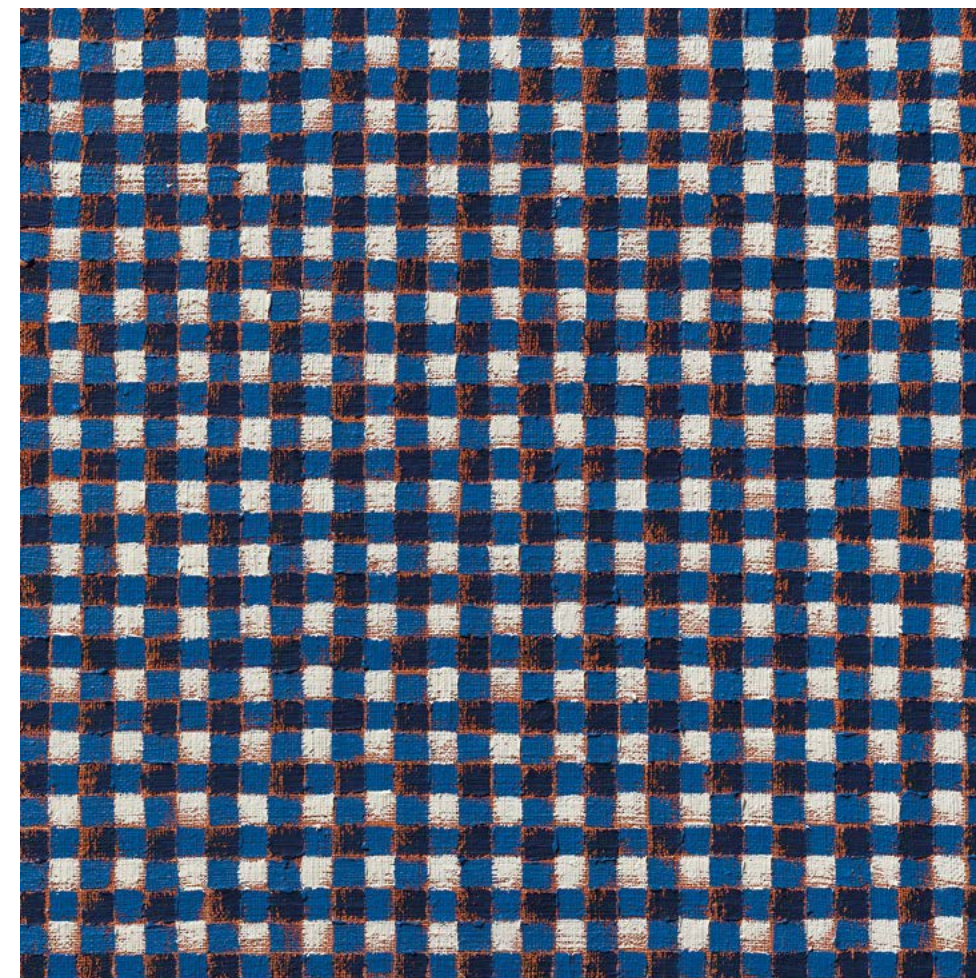
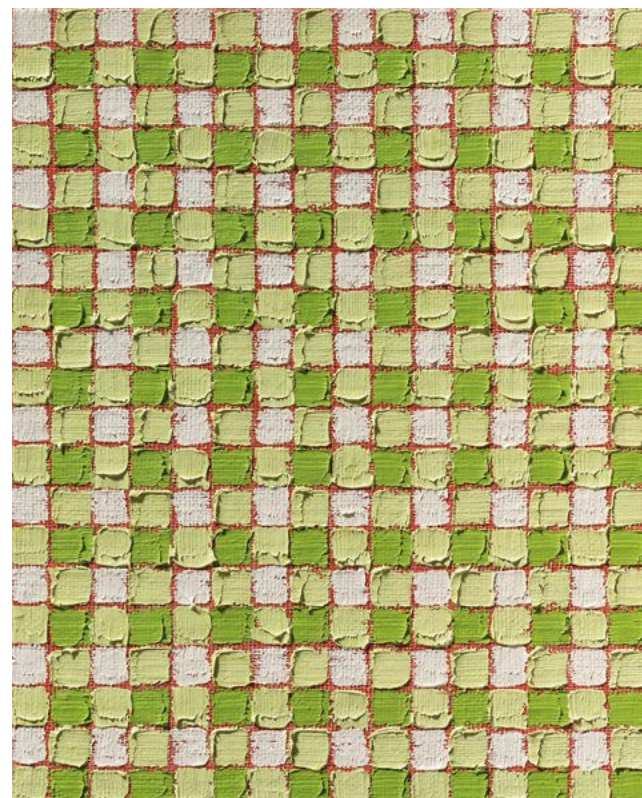
It is approaching seven am in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when we speak, so it seems fitting to ask what the day has in store for Michelle Grabner. As well as maintaining an art practice, Grabner works as an educator, curator and writer, and routine is elusive. While the previous day was spent with graduate students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, this morning she is preparing to head to Kohler, about an hour north of Milwaukee. The town is home to Kohler Industrial Castings, a factory known for porcelain toilets and enamelled cast iron sinks. Grabner has been artist-in-residence here through the John Michael Kohler Arts Centre in nearby Sheboygan since early September.

"It's been extraordinary," she says. "In my first week, I had to pass a forklift test. I've been casting iron using a bonded sand

mould process. This has challenged not only my body but my relationship to grimy, heavy factory work. I'm valuing the routine of heavy industrial labour. It's the culture of men. I'm really grateful to have this opportunity at this point in my career."

It's unsurprising that Grabner relishes this experience with bathroom fixtures. Since she began exhibiting in the early 1990s her work has incorporated the visual vocabulary of the domestic, traditionally a woman's domain, into the male-dominated language of Modernist Abstraction. A common thread running (quite literally) through Grabner's practice has been paper weaving, which she has practised for the past 20 years, first prompted by a kindergarten craft exercise of her son's. The artist's rhythmic, repetitive creations reflect the way patterns form the backdrop to our everyday lives.





*“When I am working on repetition within a painting, I’m pushing those [educational] foundations up against 20th-century Abstraction. I think it became a concept that I was able to stretch intellectually when I was in graduate school, dealing with postmodern theory. Irony, criticality and disinterest – how did that fit with raising children and being responsible for them?”*

Grabner cites Friedrich Fröbel and Maria Montessori, inventors of pedagogical tools for early childhood, as influencing her approach to tertiary art education, as well as her own practice. “When I am working on repetition within a painting, I’m pushing those [educational] foundations up against 20th-century Abstraction. I think it became a concept that I was able to stretch intellectually when I was in graduate school, dealing with postmodern theory. Irony, criticality and disinterest – how did that fit with raising children and being responsible for them?”

A group of paintings recently exhibited at Melbourne’s Niagara Galleries are studies of that ubiquitous domestic pattern, gingham. In 2015 when Grabner was teaching at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, the nearby studio of legendary local painter Marsden Hartley

inspired her to think about using oil paint for the first time since undergraduate studies. Hartley was not the only influence.

“I’d been looking at Bonnard paintings for a while, in particular the tablecloth under his still lifes, and thinking about what it would mean to use that gingham pattern which is so open in terms of what it signifies,” she says. “It migrates between class structures, the domestic, high and low fashion – this pattern is a fantastic cliché.”

These works see the artist considering the way Bonnard’s tablecloths respond to pictorial space, and adapting that into Modernist flatness with artists like Josef Albers in mind. After more than a decade of black-and-white work, Grabner began to consider colour anew, applying a complementary under-colour “which gives a fissure to how those patterns bounce.” It’s an effect made more dynamic when

considering the application of the gingham pattern onto the paintings’ burlap surfaces – weaving is never far away.

A recent group of bronze, crocheted blanket sculptures came about through more pragmatic circumstances. “After 20 years we recently moved back to Milwaukee from Chicago. In my studio, I was using domestic textiles as painting stencils. I was faced with taking them to the dumpster or monumentalising them. What would it mean to fix these blankets that gave over their patterns to paintings over the last 20-plus years?” That led Grabner to sacrifice the paint-encrusted blankets in a lost-wax process. The sculptures are “figurative [and] collapse to gravity, in contrast to the graphic qualities of the gingham paintings. They are the result of a process of considering what my relationship to this artefact is.”

These works relate to those Grabner is developing at Kohler. Attaching ‘granny-square’ blankets to a square linear geometry, the resulting 300-pound iron, 40 x 40-inch wall-mounted works contain a material contrast and explore the authority of painting. “They’re an intersection between the bronze work and the gingham paintings,” she explains.

Parallel to her studio practice Grabner is a prolific curator and writer. Her curatorial practice in particular has spanned the regional and artist-run to the internationally facing and institutional. Two ongoing projects initiated by Grabner and her husband, artist Brad Killam, demonstrate Grabner’s interest in creating space on the periphery for experimental practice.

The Suburban is an artist project space launched in 1999 in Oak Park, Illinois, out of a desire to nurture a studio practice alongside a young family and several teaching jobs. “Unable to get out into the world, we thought we would bring the world to us.” Grabner cites the appeal of Chicago, a large Midwestern centre with extraordinary history and architecture, as key to The Suburban’s initial success. “Artists were interested in coming to visit us and mount an exhibition in the suburbs – it took pressure off, they could try something they wouldn’t be able to [elsewhere], and explore a city that many had never been to.”

MICHELLE GRABNER  
*Untitled*, 2016-17  
oil on burlap on panel  
79 x 79 cm

Opposite, left to right  
MICHELLE GRABNER  
*Untitled*, 2016-17  
oil on burlap on panel  
51 x 41 cm

MICHELLE GRABNER  
*Untitled*, 2016-17  
oil on burlap on panel  
61 x 31 cm

Previous page  
MICHELLE GRABNER  
*Untitled*, 2016-17  
oil on burlap on panel  
51 x 41 cm

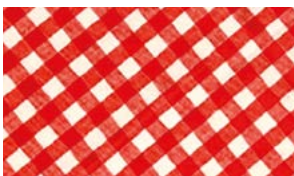
Courtesy the artist  
and Niagara  
Galleries, Melbourne





Installation views  
MICHELLE GRABNER  
*Gingham*, 2017  
Niagara Galleries,  
Melbourne

Courtesy the artist  
and Niagara  
Galleries, Melbourne



## GINGHAM

Gingham, the iconic fabric that serves as inspiration for Michelle Grabner, has a storied cultural history. It was originally imported from India to England, woven by mills in Manchester during the 18th century and later symbolised the '60s youthquake when Paulene Stone was pictured modelling it for cult London boutique, Biba.

The Poor Farm, near Grabner's current home in central Wisconsin, occupies a rural situation rather than a suburban one, and exhibitions run for a full year (alongside other programming). "We found ourselves spending a lot of time in our rural studio in the summer, so why not then fold in artists, artmaking and interesting thinking into that experience? It goes back to understanding the context we're living in, to interact with other artists, and knowing where your values and priorities fit into the bigger art world."

A notable experience of that world came via Grabner's experience of curating the 2014 Whitney Biennial alongside artists Stuart Comer and Anthony Elms. "The Whitney Biennial was probably the greatest education I've ever had in a small period of time. It helped me understand artists, the press, criticality, institutions, different power structures in the art world in this centre, New York." Grabner has continued to take on these types of curatorial engagements "as a way to examine creativity and power structures, and the way those are related."

A peripheral perspective is important in this regard. "Coming from the Midwest – being off-centre, it allows me [to look] into these more dense cultural incubators and see patterns that if I was embedded in, say, New York City, I couldn't." It's a scenario those of us in Australasia might find parallels in. "Regionality, locality, globalism – I know those things are collapsing, but..." She considers our phone call. "You're about to go to bed and I'm drinking coffee to start the day. That stutter in time allows for investigations in form and thinking, and I value that. I became an artist in the Midwest, and I don't like working within

the shadows of big cultural institutions. I need that distance for my own imagination."

As the clock ticks closer to one am in my Sydney kitchen and Grabner prepares to head to the foundry to start her day in the US Midwest, I wonder what is next on the cards for this artist whose practice celebrates that which is central, from the vantage point of the periphery. Her current curatorial preoccupation is FRONT International: Cleveland Exhibition for Contemporary Art. A new take on the biennale model, it will include city-wide solo and group exhibitions of artists' work and objects drawn from local collections, site-specific interventions, residencies, public programs and a temporary academy. Grabner is also excited about a forthcoming project that will take place in the only prefab home designed by Mies van der Rohe, a predominantly glass structure known as the McCormick House, located in suburban Chicago. The project, opening in January, will include the iron objects created in the foundry as well as alterations of products from Kohler's production line. "Before they're enamelled, when they come right out of the mould, these cast iron sinks are beautiful forms, abstractions. Thinking about how that site can stretch my thinking is exciting." **V**

FRONT International opens July 14 and shows until September 30, 2018. Michelle Grabner is represented by Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Rocket Gallery, London, James Cohan Gallery, New York, Green Gallery, Milwaukee, Gallery 16, San Francisco and Anne Mosseri-Marlio Galerie, Basel.

michellegrabner.com  
rocketgallery.com  
niagaragalleries.com.au  
jamescohan.com  
thegreengallery.biz  
gallery16.com