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Jessica Sanders

K A N S A S

A longtime fan of beeswax owing to its gooey organic mutability, Jessica Sanders exercised admirable restraint with the potentially messy material in her recent exhibition “Ambiguous Warmth.” Her first solo appearance at this relocated gallery, the show featured just two entries from the Brooklyn artist’s ongoing “Saturation” series, 2013-, of wax-infused linen works, and in neither case was the material’s identity immediately apparent. Hung close together side by side, the pair of large, painterly works faced off against eight small wall-mounted white porcelain sculptures. The first impression created by this arrangement was one of quiet stillness, but as the genesis and makeup of the works became clear, that sense of stasis gave way to an affecting portrait of incremental change—of creeping, seeping entropy.

In both *Saturation AW2* and *Saturation AW6* (all works 2015), fin-shaped areas of wax protrude from the panel’s left and right, leaving its central field unmarked. The substance tints the area it covers a soft brownish-yellow, rendering the fabric semitranslucent while sealing its pores. Wax also spills slightly over the edges of the panel, gathering in crenellated ridges. The effect is distinctly post-painterly, recalling the work of artists from Morris Louis to Ian Davenport; and corporeal too, an association subtly underscored by Sanders’s choice of lightweight suiting linen as a support. Gravity and chance play key roles in determining the composition of such works, though these forces are of course kicked into action by the artist’s initial effort. The “Saturation” works are thus at once the result of a predetermined plan and records of unrepeatable events.

While beeswax has a storied history as an art material—think lost-wax casting, encaustic painting—and has been identified with numerous artists, from Marie Tussaud to Joseph Beuys, it takes on new resonance today owing to the incompletely understood (though likely pesticide-linked) decline in honeybee numbers. This casts the substance in something of a different light. Is it possible that a material that has been used by humans for millennia, which never goes bad, and which can be used and reused almost indefinitely, will soon become a rare commodity? Whether Sanders had this in mind when she began using it is unclear, but the issue hovers over output nonetheless. Add this to wax’s relative instability from a conservation point of view, and the works acquire a new tension, a provocation expressed in the quietest of voices.

To make her porcelain works, Sanders has employed her training as a ceramicist, producing slip-cast fragments of a mold salvaged from a previous project. In each, a flat, roughly rectangular panel sits atop one or two slightly longer beam-like strips, the results looking like old signs or offcuts from a sun-bleached wooden fence. All about a foot high and six inches wide, they are arranged in two rows of four, their scale and layout lending them a glyph-like quality. In his text on the exhibition, curator-critic Alex Bacon suggests that what appeals most to the artist about clay parallels her attraction to wax; both substances undergo a radical formal transformation in reaction to heat that is predictable in a general sense but never in its details. The cast textures of wood grain and forms of screw heads discernible on the surfaces of *Mold Form AW1* and its companions reflect a different kind of truth to materials, in which one substance records another. But, as in the “Saturation” series, it’s the works’ slow burn that affects us.

—Michael Wilson