



The Middle of White

A Recipe + Narrative Discussing
Sarah Blyth-Stephens + Michelle Grabner

by Matt Morris

We had sent the press release out several weeks earlier, and had already drummed up some interest in the upcoming two-person exhibition. We'd been playing around with the structure of pairing a local artist that interested us with an 'art hero' that lives, works and exhibits elsewhere. Such a model suits our mission, which, among other things, seeks to place Cincinnati's most progressive contemporary artists into a larger global context.

Sarah was someone we had planned on inviting to show about as long as U-turn has existed. Her sculptural works are made on site. They are temporary and are destroyed at the end of an exhibition. Oftentimes, alternative galleries like ours are small, shabby spaces, but we had been fortunate to have a large, shabby space: perfect for Sarah to create new work at an ambitious scale.

It would be tough to say that we create "thematic" exhibitions, but when we have done projects with two or more artists, we've looked for underlying traits in the work that may take on new or different interest when seen in relation to other work. Since our beginning in 2009, we have had a show in our notes dubbed "ephemerality/temporality." We'd originally envisioned it including a number of artists, but as we considered how discreet, subtle and quiet much of this art was, it was gradually refined to just pair Sarah with another artist.

Michelle is that artist. Her inclusion shifted the interests that formed the basis of the exhibition. Neither obviously temporary nor ephemeral, her work plays with the subtle variations of the materials she employs, and brings an intense focus to the act(s) of drawing/painting. Time comes into play in her work, both in its production and in the artwork's life as it changes with age. As a foil to Sarah's installation, we saw a wealth of comparisons and points of contrast in their working methods.

Our previous exhibition was packed away. I had sat folding paintings into bubble wrap sleeves, while other people opened cans of white spackle to fill in nail holes, which would later be gone over with the white wall paint we use in the space.

Michelle Grabner's works on paper had arrived in the mail, and Eric had designed a layout for them that would place them at set intervals around the entire space. We'd set a time for Sarah to begin her work in the gallery. I looked at my calendar and remembered I needed to buy the ingredients for a white chocolate bread pudding I'd committed to bringing to a birthday party in a few days.

Ingredients.

9 ounces white chocolate
30 inches of French bread
4 whole eggs
6 egg yolks
4 cups heavy whipping cream
1 cup milk
1 cup sugar

Preheat oven to 300 degrees F.

In November of 2010, Eric and I were in New York City. We were staying with friends, and taking daytrips out to Rhode Island and Massachusetts to see art. One late afternoon we ventured out to Minus Space, a gallery project run by our pal Matthew Deleget in Brooklyn. A number of artists we have worked with have shown with Matthew previously, and he himself has exhibited with us. If there is one gallery that, in my mind, is a clear precedent to what I've hoped to bring to Cincinnati through U-turn, it is Minus. While we were there, I saw Michelle Grabner's works on paper in person for the first time. Each heavy sheet of Arches had been treated with black gesso across their fronts, with a dense accumulation of vertical lines drawn in silverpoint across the surface.

The work is highly formalist, and her handiwork is evident in the finished objects. They refer to nothing other than themselves, the materials from which they are composed, and the gestures/actions used to realize them. The silvery quality of the lines can, at times, be optically suggestive of space. The tarnishing process of the metal itself is a subtle record of the space and conditions surrounding each work. The labor, repetition and variation involved in these works instill a complexity into what is initially a minimal visual encounter.

We saw a number of good shows in New York that autumn, but Michelle's work stayed with me most of all. There is plenty more to endear her to my interests than just her art. Her artistic career is filled with multiple roles: along with being incredibly prolific in producing and exhibiting her art, she is also the head of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (I think her presiding over both painting and drawing keeps me from calling her own creative output one thing or the other.) On top of that, she is an art critic who regularly contributes to all the most highly reputed

Both Sarah and Michelle make use of materials in such a way that they remain themselves, but profoundly so. While I have seen other projects where Sarah has manipulated sheets of aluminum foil hung like a curtain, a towering stack of blank white copy paper or totemic, coiling, goofily phallic latex balloons, she has been in process with a plaster-like material called Hydrocal for several years. It is a white, gypsum cement that is soft, fine and delicate, but also heavy, durable and hard. In 2010, she pushed her work in Hydrocal to greater scale, creating a number of sculptures that stood taller than average human height, and curved through spaces like parenthetical dividers, ghostly hardened curtains. These works become architectural interventions, oscillating between object and demarcation of space. This is what she had been invited to create inside U-turn.

periodicals in the art world. She also operates two gallery projects: The Suburban is another artist-run exhibition space from which we've drawn inspiration in how U·turn operates, and more recently The Poor Farm in Waupaca County, WI. And she is a mom. So she is an inspiration to pretty much anyone who needs it.

My first contact to her was a piece of fan mail. And from there, a touch-and-go correspondence led to her participation in this exhibition at U·turn. The black works would be a high contrast pairing to Sarah's work, while sharing many conceptual and process-driven impulses.

When Sarah first saw Michelle's works in the gallery before we installed them, she seemed amused at the similarities they bore to her own drawing practice, evidence of which none of us who run the space had ever seen or known about. The overlap is unsurprising; Michelle may sit at a table drawing straight marks over sheets of paper, while Sarah is swinging splashes of Hydrocal that run down plastic curtains, but the gesture is nearly the same.

Slice French bread into 1/2-inch thick round croutons and set aside. In a large mixing bowl, combine eggs and egg yolks. Using a wire whisk, whip until well-blended and set aside. In a large saucepan, combine whipping cream, milk and sugar. Bring mixture to a low simmer then add white chocolate. Using a wire whisk, stir until chocolate is completely melted. Remove pot from heat and, stirring quickly, add whipped eggs to the cream mixture. Blend thoroughly to keep eggs from scrambling.

"I'll just be upstairs if you need anything."

I live two floors above the gallery, and had just finished helping Sarah get all of the equipment into the space that she would need to create the new, site responsive work. As a curator, I'll sometimes stay in the space with an artist as they create an installation, in case they need an extra set of hands or a second opinion.

And certainly I wanted to be near by and available to Sarah as she got started. What seem like magically simple finished works actually come about through a savvy set of techniques that she's learned through trial and error, sensitivity and an attentiveness to the material she uses. I imagine her in her studio at the University of Cincinnati where she was recently in grad school, having a silent, telepathic conversation with the Hydrocal: "What can you do? What are your inherent qualities? How can I manipulate you so that the gamut of those qualities are readily apparent to viewers?"

These sculptures/dividers/spaces are created on site by pouring and splashing Hydrocal across curtains of plastic that are removed after the works have dried, leaving delicate white records of their active production. Because of the 'splatter factor' to how these works are made, plastic sheeting is hung on the walls and covered over the floor. The effect is like an impromptu surgery theatre.

I helped however I could to get this set up in place. But as Sarah began preparations to mix the powdered cement with water in large buckets, I thought of Hans Namuth's 1950 documentary footage of Jackson Pollock making a painting. Shot beneath a sheet of glass he painted on, the viewer is put in the odd position of being beyond the surface on which Pollock worked. While perhaps not outright invasive, there is a detached sense of voyeurism in that film. Explosive arguments between Pollock and Namuth afterward called into question whether or not performing for the camera may have sabotaged Pollock's process.

The last thing I wanted was any of that kind of drama, so I thought to make myself scarce. And besides, I had a bread pudding to make. I went upstairs.

I felt there were similarities between what I was doing and what Sarah was doing two floors down. If Hydrocal is anything like plaster, its temperature rises as it begins to set up in the bucket. Meanwhile, I vigilantly stirred the milk, cream and sugar in a saucepan over heat, making sure it didn't roll into a mighty boil. When it was heated and the sugar pretty well dissolved, I added the white chocolate, whisking away so that it would become incorporated into the mixture. My thoughts telegraphed downstairs to where Sarah was starting to construct her walls through overlapping splashes. My whisking continued when the eggs were added so that none of it would start to cook. Even still, I almost always run the mixture through a sieve before pouring it over the sliced bread.

In a 9" x 13" baking dish, place bread slices in 2 to 3 layers. Pour 1/2 of the cream mixture over the bread, allowing it to soak up most of the mixture prior to adding the rest. Using your fingertips, press the bread gently allowing the cream mixture to be absorbed evenly into the bread. Pour remaining cream mixture over the bread and repeat process. Cover dish with aluminum foil and allow to soak a minimum of 5 hours prior to baking.

On the evening of the first day, one of the two walls fell. Sarah seemed totally at peace with this occurrence, so I decided to follow her lead. I was able to see that the fragility of the structure, and its mutability over time was of interest to her, rather than something to be avoided at all costs. Even when the entire space was cleaned up, she asked us not to worry if they fell.

I replied that I was going to worry until we got proper documentation. After that, *Que Sera, Sera*. We still had to light the show, and moving the oversized ladder around these works made my breath catch in my chest.

Lighting is one of my gorgeous hobbies in the gallery. There's nothing like it. Creation mythologies beginning with "Let there be light" bounces around my decisions as I move fixtures around, choose floods over spots. One thing we've learned is that it's often easier and better in the long run to take out all of the lights to start with. Zach and I had hung Michelle's work, but I started by lighting only Sarah's piece.

With just four bulbs on it in the darkened room, the piece lit up like a lantern. All of the details in the forms were dazzlingly apparent. Drips, layers, puddles, lacy gaps with light spilling through: we had turned a light onto Sarah's process of making them. All of the gestures that I had excused myself from witnessing seemed reanimated and glowing. Those of us who run the space were speechless, in a sublime state of wonderment. I have never experienced anything like those minutes in all the rest of the exhibitions I've ever organized. When we could talk, we talked about what an ideal way this was to see her installation.

It became our goal to preserve as much of that luminosity as possible with Michelle's work also lit. That evening, we and our lights were an added layer of materials and process in the exhibition. Like the studio conversations I had imagined Sarah having, we were asking her and Michelle's work about the light it needed.

Work of this kind breaks down the actions and material stuff of everything else around it, even the project of operating a gallery space. Floors and walls and meetings and light and disagreements and food for the reception all sit together in the hours stretching across the gallery's timeline. The work of these two artists is very special to me, because it simplifies how I see all other parts of visual culture and how we present it to one another.

Bake, covered, for approximately 1 hour then remove foil and bake 45 additional minutes or until top is golden brown.

As I've thought about Michelle's process, I have continued to half-recall a sentence or two from one of my undergraduate professors, Gary Gaffney. Whether academic or studio based, my coursework with Gary was always highly experimental, and in one way or another, he could conceptually trace what we were doing back to drawing as a base instinct. I e-mailed him to try to fill out what I vaguely remember to the following effect: When man first picked up a stick, it was not to create a weapon, but to bend over and draw a mark in the dirt. In our correspondence, Gary added these notes, "I believe the act of making a mark to draw an image is preliminary to making a mark to verbalize a concept. I also believe that the act of drawing makes any tool into a more powerful weapon than any gun."

I sense such ideas submerged in Michelle's mode of working. The repeated lines on the page are pre-image and all but ineffable. What is there to say about them? Whatever I could pertain to the action, the meditative, repetitive act. I recreate the arm movement when I follow the lines, usually from bottom to top. On some, the lines are coldly silver, on others beguiling yellows or pale greens. Sometimes I think I see a rose tint as they tarnish. They are all untitled works, and they attract no additional ideas to them beyond how what we see registers in our minds.





It wasn't until we had unpacked Michelle's work in the gallery that I thought of Sol LeWitt. I had seen her spring exhibition at Shane Campbell in Chicago called *Like A Rare Morel*, in which a series of gridded and checkered works on panel were hung close together in a forceful band around the main space. When she showed at Minus Space, it was also an inventive rethinking of gallery conventions when the works were installed low on the wall. Michelle entrusted us to decide how best to present the work in this exhibition.

It seemed to us that their visual simplicity and the impact of the black rectangles on white walls cast them as a type of drawing that approaches architecture. While each one is totally unique, they read as units, and we had received enough of them to create a pretty tight bar of black around the entire space if we so chose.

What Eric Ruschman devised was a system of spacing that took windows, doorways and corners into account so that the works could be evenly spaced around the room. Because a tall window interrupts the left wall of the gallery, we decided to hang the works with their bottom edges level with the windowsill. These two maneuvers seemed to successfully integrate Michelle's works into a space that was eager to receive them, but that she had never seen in person. Positioned thus, they function with a similar totality and presence as Sarah's soaring wall works.

They have been lit so that the silvery marks pick up light from different angles. They activate and glitter as the viewer traverses the space in front of them, and as one deepens into dull black-on-black, the next one down the wall flashes resolvedly.

This bread pudding is actually better if chilled in the refrigerator overnight, after baking, then cut into squares and heated in individual portions in the microwave. You may wish to create a white chocolate sauce for topping the bread pudding by combining 8 ounces of melted white chocolate and 3 ounces of heavy whipping cream. This may be done in a double boiler or microwave.

Sarah decided to title her piece "Wallish No. 3," as the third iteration of this process. The space between the two curved walls is very charged. The arching pour-shapes that make up the forms remind me of Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau entrances to the Parisian subway, and for sure the space between and around the Hydrocal elements become an intermediate passageway. Visitors to the gallery have not seemed to understand how the work was produced, even after we've offered detailed explanations. Even demystified to the most basic use of mold-making and casting, they remain somehow mystical. When someone walks past them with heavy clomps, the tallest stalagmites sway gently.

he work has changed throughout the month. Some areas that had seemed to arch backwards as they rose off the floor have since snapped off under their own weight. We've left the white shards on the floor, as if the sculpture has thrown itself a party, an all-white bon voyage for its inevitable deconstruction. The lifespan of the structures is a confrontation with the real. Practicality, gravity and other forces force them into a limited engagement.

Meanwhile, Michelle's untitled works are a constant, perpetual chorus: plural, dark and metallic. They have seemed more at home in our space to me than almost anything else we've ever shown, perhaps because they were created by an artist who understands what is implicitly involved in an artist-run project of this kind. They are pristine, frank, and humble in the way things are when they've been produced by honest hands.

In less than an hour after arriving at the birthday party, dessert in hand, the bread pudding had been totally consumed. I didn't get a chance to reheat it, which is how it is ideally served, but no one seemed to question that. Strangers approached me to talk about its deliciousness and the weight of it in their stomachs. Somehow, I felt that their descriptions referred back to the artworks I was bringing together during the day I made it.

Notes.

The recipe included in this text was created by John Folse, a Louisiana chef with restaurants, TV shows, a radio show and products that filled my Southern childhood. He notes that this is a traditional New Orleans dessert, and this recipe has served me well as I have used it and created variations on it for years.

Thanks to Gary Gaffney for his help in drafting this text. Thanks to both artists in this exhibition for their willing and enthusiastic involvement. And a very special thanks to Matthew Deleget, for his assistance with this exhibition, as well as all of the other profound ways he has helped U-turn find its successes.