

HYPERALLERGIC

An Exhibition that Frustrates Our Grasp of Abstraction

Though *Out of Easy Reach* has a unifying theme, it presents a variety of tastes and approaches in a way that feels like ungainly curation which ultimately does not clarify how these women artists now steer the conversation about abstraction.

Seph Rodney Aug 1, 2018



Installation view of Shinique Smith's "Forgiving Strands" (2014–present) at *Out of Easy Reach*, Stony Island Arts Bank (all installation images taken in Stony Island Arts Bankd are by David C. Sampson, and courtesy Stony Island Arts Bank.)

CHICAGO — Given a title that lends itself to semantic play, *Out of Easy Reach*, the multi-site exhibition of 24 artists at the DePaul Art Museum, Stony Island Arts Bank, and Gallery 400 offers an easy on-ramp for entering the critical flow of conversation. For one thing, there's the work really is practically not close at hand, but spread throughout Chicago. It took me the better part of a day to travel by public transportation to see all the venues in geographically separate areas of the city: the West Loop, Lincoln Park, and the South Side. (Plus there's some easter eggs for those who aren't worn out by traveling: more work by three of the featured artists, Sheree Hovsepien, Caroline Kent, and Abigail Deville, at Monique Meloche gallery.) The

show, curated by Allison M. Glenn, conversely has a fairly easily graspable conceit: it calls out the nature and significance of contributions of women (per the wall text) “from the Black and Latina diaspora” to the (ongoing) conversation around abstraction. All indications are that by “abstraction” Glenn means visual art that does not visually illustrate or represent that which we see and experience in real life. So, the work is not within easy reach, but its ostensible importance is. I agree with this premise.

It is about time for the US arts community to have the opportunity to seriously consider the artistic endowments made to this genre of visual artwork by women of color, because they are unique, poised, and take the discussion around abstraction to useful places. Seeing this show I discovered that the conversation about materiality is widened by the work of Shinique Smith who who spreads out all over the gallery space in a way that mimics organic forms. And that discourse is made more complex by Abigail DeVille’s use of historicized imagery that indicates the racialized, socio-political realities that underpin her works of jagged, splintery collages. Still, though this exhibition ostensibly has a unifying theme, the three main spaces present a variety of tastes and approaches in a way that feels like ungainly curation which ultimately does not clarify how these women artists now steer the conversation.



Installation view of Shinique Smith’s “Bale Variant No. 0022” (2012) at Sony Island Arts Bank

The place where I felt the presentation was most focused and convincing was easily Stony Island. Its building feels like it was once a space of opulence, perhaps a theater, with its high ceilings, nooks, and plaster facades. Thus, wandering around it on an early Saturday afternoon made me feel like I was investigating a space that held secrets and stories. (It was actually once a savings and loan bank.) Here I was able to turn a corner in my understanding of Shinique Smith's work. I have seen her work before but hadn't been able to form an opinion or conviction about it. But her installation in Stony Bank seems to be about taking over the space, reclaiming it through her room-size installations of stuffed fabric hanging from the ceiling. But the fabric pieces don't just pervade the space without some reciprocity — Smith uses seemingly personal items as anchoring elements in her pieces, such as luggage tags. This work feels like it is concerned with transforming the space around it, making it into a hive where these cocoons can live out their gestation. The better surprise is in a second room where Smith has a stack of used clothing arranged in a pillar, a structure composed of bodily castoffs raised to the rafters, raised to the roof, thereby becoming totemic. Smith's pieces rescue the detritus of modern life from meaninglessness.

In the same space, Hovsepian presents framed, concentrated contemplations of material associated with women, such as hosiery, in which the stretched fabric creates prisms through which to see other scrimms. Each of these pieces feels like a shrunken theater: lovely, layered, and lyrical. The other works she has here also add primeval graphic elements that resemble rocks and sticks interrupted by geometric plane figures. (Similar work is on display at Monique Meloche gallery, though these pieces add African masks and yarn to make visual vignettes that might be stories, might be archaeological finds.) Finishing off the exhibition is one of Barbara Chase Riboud's steles, "Little Gold Flag" (1985) an elegant and compelling détente between the oppositional factions of braided silk and crumpled, polished bronze. This part of the overall exhibition feels like it has the clearest curatorial vision.

Gallery 400 was looser in its curation, putting together graphic prints, textiles, video, and sculpture that didn't share the same concerns. It was the most challenging space, mostly because I had to switch intellectual gears from piece to piece. I appreciated Yvette Mayorga's monuments, but didn't care for them. They look like tiered, frosted cakes consisting of a smorgasbord of materials made into a festive overflow: foam, plaster, toy soldiers, hair, balloons, wood, fabric, and acrylic paint. They have a slathered-on aesthetic that reads to me as spendthrift with materials that are not, in and of themselves, particularly meaningful. Yet, one gets from her work an overflow of decorative filigree that becomes abject in its abundance — the visual equivalent of feeling sick after imbibing too much sugar. These works are too much in a way that feels genuine. And I have a similar response to Lisa Alvarado's combination of acrylic paint and

fabric based on Mexican textiles, which look like very intricate tapestries hung from wood poles. The work of geometric forms and jagged lines in bright, garish colors is so finely wrought, and seems both contemporary and ancient at the same time, that they visually surprise. They also break up the gallery space by creating hallways and portals, which feels freeing.

On the other hand the work of Torkwase Dyson, also represented here, requires different perceptual tools. Dyson is widely respected and valued for her keen intellect. Yet, even after listening to her talk about her work in an intimate group studio visit a few months ago, I still remain baffled by it. Dyson speaks about her drawings and sculpture as if what she produces are abstraction of thought that are already abstractions. She's spoken of "hyperobjects," which, near as I can tell, has to do with philosophical concepts forwarded by Timothy Morton, but are reconfigured to encompass African-American life, ecological justice, a lexicon of "shape language" that Dyson is cultivating, and graphic drawings like the ones shown here. These disparate ideas never quite cohere for me in her work. To wit, the drawings she has presented here "Untitled (Hypershape)" (2017) tend to read as small-scale, post-war, minimalist abstraction which has little to do with what she says she's interested in. This work illustrates for me the very palpable gap between what it sometimes grandiose discourse about visual work and the lived experience of it.

And speaking of work belied by its rhetorical scaffolding, the work by Juliana Huxtable is the most disappointing. Her work here consists of texts that gesture in the direction of poetry but never actually rise to the occasion of being poetic. Huxtable's self-positioning as a transgender transgressive artist is rooted in an origin story that she is far too enamored with — so much so that she neglects to make content that rewards the viewer's intellectual or visual engagement. What's more, Huxtable feels shoe-horned into this exhibition since a great deal of her work and the essence of her practice is self-portraiture that works the tropes of identity.

The DePaul University Museum was the display space with the most coldly modernist feel. Jennie C. Jones fits right in here with her sculptural work "Gray Measure with Clipped Tone (Inverses)" (2016) which consists of monochrome acoustic paneling and a painted canvas that meet in the corner of a wall. It has a rigorous quietude that doesn't aim to be visually seductive, but rather is concerned with what happens when chromatically related materials that have very different textures come together. Alternatively, Abigail DeVille with her "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me from Nobody Knows My Name" (2015) is visually boisterous. The collage work is composed of broken glass and archival photos she discovered in Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. And for all its sharp angles and dangerous surfaces, it reads as a fragile historical document that is both partially revealed and partially hidden by becoming this aesthetic object.

And lastly, this theme of hiding and recognition further pursued in a color photograph by Xaviera Simmons, "On Sculpture #2" (2011). The photo depicts a pair of dark-skinned hands holding up a black and white photograph in which silhouetted figures are seen jumping overboard from a small boat. The smaller photograph is held in such a way, blocking the view of what seems like a seascape, that it becomes a kind of prism, through which an historical event is

superimposed on what seems like a benign image. The work might be viewed as abstraction in terms of the way it suggests that events and histories become abstracted through documentary records. The records both hide and reveal what is most often only a partial comprehension.



Xaviera Simmons, "On Sculpture #2" (2011) (photo by the author)

This I find is the strength and weakness of *Out of Easy Reach*: It offers a wide range of vigorous and fascinating responses to the canonized notion of abstraction that I grew up with — largely focused on heroic male figures. But the particular spaces don't always put artists in conversation with each other in ways that illuminate the significance of the specific ideas they are wrestling with. This show could have brought these artists and their concerns into a useful compass based on thematic concerns or similarities in practice, but that never quite happens. This is a worthwhile series of exhibitions, but it doesn't bring the work to our waiting hands.