

REVIEW - 01 JAN 2012

Sadie Benning

BY KRISTIN M. JONES



Sadie Benning *Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea*, 2005, medite 2, spray-paint, dowls and plaster

Like a pop song that keeps taking off in surprising directions, Sadie Benning's work suggests a constant slippage between abstraction and representation, sound and image, motion and stillness, colour and its absence. Benning will always be known for the intimate, richly textured Pixelvision videos she began making as a teenager, but she has long drawn and painted. She has also used objects in her videos to formal and expressive ends, such as the dolls in *Jollies* (1990) and the paper masks in *Flat is Beautiful* (1998). More recently, Benning has been creating installations that incorporate object-based art work along with video and sound. For the two-channel video installation *Play Pause* (2001–06), for example, she animated hundreds of black and white gouache drawings depicting figures, abstract patterns and urban scenes, occasionally using colour filters.

So it shouldn't be surprising that the title of Benning's show at Participant Inc., 'Transitional Effects', alluded

to film editing techniques such as wipes, fades and cuts, and that the seven small-scale paintings that were on view, which at first glance seem to be modest abstractions, represent a moment of instability, suspension and potentially dramatic transformation. They especially evoke the wipe, a crude effect in which one scene seems to sweep the other away as the boundary between them moves across the screen. Each two-colour painting is a square or rectangle formed from a pair of adjoining monochrome panels made of dowels and sanded and spray-painted modelling compound or plaster. It's unclear, however, which hue would obliterate the other, which identity would take over, if the transition hadn't been paused, as if on a video screen.

Benning's work is rife with such ambiguities. Her palette has a mass-produced look – a punchy comic-book matter-of-factness – that contrasts with the slightly lumpy, hand-modelled panels. In *Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea* (2005), a diagonal break separates a black panel from a smaller Silly Putty-pink triangular one. And in *Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red* (2011), a misshapen zingy cherry-red rectangle and the larger sky-blue panel it juts into echo the colours of a superhero costume, though the mood is uncertain, mournful or deadpan – anything but heroic. In these works, abstraction is inseparable from performance, as if the ghost of Minimalism were being summoned on a video screen. And despite the sanding, a sculptural quality remains, as if they were cast in plaster or modelled in clay.

Just as Benning, with her thoughtful sleight-of-hand, can make paintings function like videos or sculpture, she can also coax songs into acting like paintings. Here, the paintings were accompanied by a single-channel video she shot with a vintage black and white tube camera, *Old Waves Record One / Old Waves Record Two* (2011). As a group of Benning's own songs play on the soundtrack, most of the lyrics – recalling texts in her Pixelvision works but unaccompanied by images – appear on the screen as graffiti-like scrawled inter-titles. At times, they reinforce the beat; at other times they underline sound effects, as in '(THUNDER & RAIN)', which flashes at the bottom of the screen, or 'BANG BANG BANG BANG ...', which scatters all over it like gunfire. 'OH HA HO OH,' she sings, and words or phrases pop up in front of you, as if from the strokes of a brush. The songs are organized into two 'records', each with an 'A side' and a 'B side', evoking an imaginary materiality.

The lyrics tell of glass ceilings, love and desire, of a group art critique, even of colours. 'CHARTREUSE IS OBTUSE / BEIGE IS NOT SAGE / BUT IT'S CLOSE TO CHAMPAGNE / IT'S SO GAY ...', part of one song goes. The mottled field on which the inter-titles appear, especially when the video screen remains blank during instrumental tracks, unsettlingly echo the spray-painted surfaces of the purportedly abstract paintings. While maintaining her low-key aesthetic, Benning constantly questions how art functions, interrupting the viewing experience as if to say, 'Hey, look there – what should we make of that?'



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