

ART & DESIGN

# Sadie Benning: ‘War Credits’

Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH    MAY 2, 2013

*Callicoon Fine Arts*

*124 Forsyth Street, near Delancey Street*

*Lower East Side*

*Through May 12*

Sadie Benning neither rushes nor rules anything out. At 19 she made a splash at the 1993 Whitney Biennial with a series of poignant yet knowing DIY videos exploring teenage sexuality and grown-up stereotypes. (One is included in “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum.) By 2007, when Ms. Benning had her first solo exhibition in New York — at Orchard, the collective-run gallery on the Lower East Side — she had added small abstract paintings to her repertoire. Her latest show is a succinct and terrific display of two videos, two paintings and a gouache. Larger and more complex than her previous works, the paintings draw on 1960s abstraction but look new. They’re composed of elements cut from a single piece of MDF (a medium-density fiberboard), then coated with plaster, painted, sanded down and reassembled on the wall. The nested, inverted L-shapes of “Blue and White Painting” form a rectangle, as do the squares of “Red and White Painting,” which have been cut with two concentric circles. Beautiful, serene and subtly handmade, they seem formed from pieces of solid color.

Ms. Benning’s black-and-white videos pursue other realities. The bleak, slightly monotonous “In Parts” (28 minutes) consists of 13 short segments,

often shot with a stationary camera, all using ambient sound: a leopard in a zoo, clouds, a city at night. Views from moving cars and of an airport tarmac define the film as a travelogue, and the scenes as diary entries or slightly mobile snapshots.

In “War Credits” Ms. Benning actively reworks the opening or closing credits of three well-known war movies, using the accompanying dialogue or music. The credits are illegible, as if blanked out by a censor; they flash like lights against the dark, grainy backgrounds, evoking an experimental film with an ominous undercurrent. There is a surprising resonance in Ms. Benning’s reality, as suggested by the gouache, an abstraction painted on newsprint.

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