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Campers, Sunsets, and Junkyards: Sarah Braman’s Containers of Light



Sarah Braman, “T.V.” (2016), fabric dye and polyurethane on plywood (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

I’d call Sarah Braman’s show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash a breakthrough were it not for her slow and steady ascent. You Are Everything, her first solo New York City exhibition in five years, presents a newfound ease with her material, a gracefulness in both subject and physicality I hadn’t noticed before. It’s as if she had traversed the messy, awkward, early stages of self-conscious invention and emerged on the other side, fully confident and in total command.

Light, color, and beauty arrive side-by-side with the detritus of civilization. Wandering into the exhibition, I was enveloped in enough purple and orange hand-dyed fabrics, kitschy sunsets, lean-tos and salvaged bunk beds to fill a Grateful Dead

campground. But the longer you linger, the more you see the interconnectedness between the individual components — the structures made from glass and found objects, including the rear half of a white Toyota Celica, and the paintings on plywood hanging on the wall, as in the purplish square and parallelogram on a florescent orange field in the painted panel, “Radio” (2016), which formally refer to the square and parallelogram (or cube and parallelepiped) of the nearby sculpture, “Recover” (2016), while also relating to another panel painting, “T.V.” (2016), a three-way call-and-response. Reverberations of shape, line, and color double and multiply.

I first came upon a Sarah Braman sculpture at the Greater New York show at PS 1 in 2005. It was a tipi structure set on rocky gravel in the museum's courtyard. In 2008, she had a solo show of sliced-up office furniture (the discarded kind one finds on New York City streets) that was then reconfigured and tagged with bits of spray paint. I encountered her colored glass structures, which were set in combination with a cut-up trailer van, in her solo debut at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in 2010. A show at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 2014 tied her glass containers of colored light to artists like Larry Bell and Dan Graham, whose glass sculptures call attention to the experience of perception.

In Braman's, case though, such structures seem more directly related to the scale of the human body, recalling a clothes closet or a doorway (although given the otherworldly color, more likely a Star Trek transporter). Gone in this new work are the chilly office desks and splintery-edged, painted plywood panels, swapped out for clean edges and inviting resting places.

Perhaps the most difficult piece to get a read on is the one that greets us at the gallery door. "Now?" (2016) consists of that white Toyota Celica, sawn neatly in half between the front and back seats (reminiscent of the work of Gordon Matta Clark) and joined to a white metal frame bunk bed, propping it up. Storm doors are then attached to the bed, one with a nicely spray-painted blue screen. Braman's assemblage art comes from her uncanny knack for putting unlikely things together and making them hold. This can be a tricky business, as individual components maintain strong label identity, such as "car part," but she deftly navigates this terrain through her use of all white metal components, including the white marker on the glass of the storm door, lending a formal unity to the piece.

Spend time with it and things begin to align. The top of the blue screen lines up with a bed support which itself is attached to the car roof. There is also a play between the weighty mass of the car rear and the "containers" of space formed by the storm doors and bed frame, and inside the seating area of the car. A similar juxtaposition is echoed in the nearby sculpture, "Space Talk" (2016), in which a luminous, blue glass aquarium-like structure is set into a massive tree stump. The incongruity of a container of blue light wedged into a large natural form is allayed by Braman's poetic play of the organic against the geometric, as well as the specificity of her color combinations, scale, and materials.



Sarah Braman, "Space Talk" (2016), tree stump, steel and glass (click to enlarge)



Sarah Braman, "Now?" (2016), steel bed frame, rear half of toyota celica, acrylic paint. aluminum steel doors and paint marker

Braman's art begins in the salvaged stuff she finds at the junkyard. Implicit is the idea of redeeming these castoffs toward a higher purpose (art-making) but perhaps equally important is the notion of recycling and environmental protection. One sculpture featuring two bunk beds – one mounted diagonally to the other – is titled "In Bed (how do we sleep when the planet is melting?)" (2016). Although the piece features beautiful pink glass panels, dyed nature-themed bed sheets, and a mattress to rest on, the massive bunk bed angled dangerously on top of it suggests just how precarious a balancing act living on this planet is.

"21 Ridgewood Road" (2016) seems almost 'tossed off' in its deceptive casualness. It's a collection of found furniture turned mostly on its head and propped on a small glass pedestal. The inclusion of a sign with the word "Free" written on it, along with the title of the piece, is an example of Braman's sly humor, conjuring a scenario in which she's driving down a country road, spots a pile of junk in a front yard and loads everything into her pickup truck, including the sign.

Braman's panel paintings are also impressive. "Night Kitchen" (2014) recalls Julian Schnabel in its clunky funkiness (where Schnabel used driftwood, Braman uses a kitchen cutting board and firewood). But the space, color, and insouciant charm are more reminiscent of Mary Heilmann.

The two tours-de-force in the show are very large sculptures "Recover" and "Driving, sleeping, screwing, reading" (both 2016), the latter title an obvious take-off on Philip Guston's famous "Painting, Smoking, Eating" (1973). These pieces have a social dimension, inviting us inside to recline, hang out, or read. "Driving,..." features a truck camper top over a transparent, colored-glass structure, with two walls lined with a dyed fabric print of trees. A sunset is printed on the camper top and on the floor lies a floral patterned Indian rug, with a bunch of scavenged books piled on top. Some of the titles — Making Things Grow Outdoors, Space, Everything Belongs, alongside Rollo May's *The Courage To Create* — supply an ironically appropriate coda for the show, underscored by the fact that they too were found at the dump.

“Recover” is magical: from the outside, it’s a darkly reflective, ultramarine glass parallelepiped structure wedged to a squarish tent of brightly colored fabric, combining Braman’s early interest in tipis/tents with her more recent fascination with containers of colored light. It works beautifully as an object if seen only from the outside, but that’s only half the fun. Climb inside and experience the work more fully. Recline on the purple padded cushion, your vision awash in an array of rainbow-colored light. You can see out, but



Sarah Braman, “In Bed (how do we sleep when the planet is melting?)” (2016), steel bunk beds, mattress, glass, aluminum frame, storm door, acrylic sticker, hand dyed bed sheets, acrylic and enamel

no one can see in. Every panel is a different transparent color: pink, orange, turquoise. Red light pours in through the dyed fabric. Move around, and the glass panels refract, conjuring new color combinations and lending the piece a quasi-kaleidoscopic feel. “Recover” offers a welcome respite from Chelsea gallery hopping, an opportunity to take a nap, or a quiet moment to nurse an infant (a friend used it for this).

Braman mines our throwaway culture for its domestic associations. The campers, cars, beds, doors, chairs, tables, desks, mattresses, and rugs all have a history of use, of lives lived. They are things we have walked on and through, sat on, chopped

vegetables on, ate off of, or slept on, and Braman embraces them all — Everything Belongs, as the book title says. Behind the corny titles and kitschy sunsets, I sense a genuine nostalgia for simpler times, with less rushing, achieving, and consuming, and more camping, reading, sunset-watching, love-making, and getting a good night’s rest.

I can live with that.

Sarah Braman: You Are Everything continues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 16.