

SUSAN KLEIN has exhibited her work both nationally and internationally. She has shown at the Brooklyn Artists Gym, Brooklyn NY; 3433 Gallery, Chicago, IL; PDX Contemporary Art, Portland, OR; University of Ulsan, South Korea; Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; as well as other venues. Recent awards include a full fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center, an Ox-Bow artist in residence fellowship, residency at Arteles, in Finland, and a College of Charleston Faculty Research Grant to attend the Takt Berlin residency, summer 2015. Klein received her MFA in 2004 from the University of Oregon and a BFA in 2001 from the University of New Hampshire. She is currently Assistant Professor of Art at the College of Charleston.

LECTURE AND GALLERY WALK-THROUGH WITH SUSAN KLEIN

Saturday, November 21, 2PM
 Recital Hall, Simons Center for the Arts and Halsey Institute Galleries
 Free and open to the public

MEMBERS-ONLY CURATOR-LED WALK-THROUGH

Thursday, December 3, 6PM

PURE THEATRE + SUSAN KLEIN

PURE Theatre and the Halsey Institute's newest joint venture involves a unique collaboration between theatre and visual art. Exhibiting artist Susan Klein has worked with PURE Theatre director Rodney Lee Rogers to design the set and costumes for the production *Failure: A Love Story*. While visual artists have been known to dabble in stage design and theatre companies have occasionally staged a gallery-sited performance, an artist and director working collaboratively from the ground up to produce a performance is uncommon.

FAILURE: A LOVE STORY

By Phillip Dawkins
 Directed by Rodney Lee Rogers
 November 6 – 28, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays

TALK BACK WITH ARTIST, DIRECTOR & PLAYWRIGHT

Thursday, November 12 after the performance

PURE Theatre, 477 King Street, Charleston, SC
 (843) 723-4444, puretheatre.org



LOCATION: The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
 161 Calhoun Street, 1st Floor (on the corner of St. Philip & Calhoun Streets)
 College of Charleston, School of the Arts, Charleston, SC 29401
[HALSEY.COFC.EDU](http://halsey.cofc.edu)

PARKING: Available in the St. Philip and George Street Garages

GALLERY HOURS: Mon - Sat, 11am - 4pm, or by appointment
 OPEN UNTIL 7PM ON THURSDAYS! Free and open to the public.

CONTACT: (843) 953-4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

BLOG: Join the conversation! halsey.cofc.edu/EDU/blog

BOOK A GUIDED TOUR: Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to different time lengths, group sizes, and ages. Contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator, Maya McGauley at mogauleym@g.cofc.edu or (843) 953-5957.

OUR MISSION: The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

The Halsey Institute's exhibition and education program is supported in part by the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, the Henry and Sylvia Yaschik Foundation and our Members.

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Susan Klein: Shadow Things

October 24 – December 5, 2015



Susan Klein and the Marriage of Matter and Mind

by Brit Washburn

In order to experience anything fully, we must first resist the urge to translate it into thought and, thereby, its henchman, language—that insufferably reductive impulse. This is true of emotional and ecstatic experience, as well as of our experiences of art, such as poetry, music, and, importantly, the paintings, drawings, and sculptures of Susan Klein (b. 1979). Visual art exists to be seen, and the longer we can inhabit the experience of seeing, rather than translate what we see back into the thought or idea from which it may or may not have sprung, the more likely we are to be transformed by it. “Understanding color” Klein has said, “is just as challenging as understanding Foucault.”

In the midsection, a field of variegated cobalt blue, suggestive of sky, or mountains in shadow. Above, amorphous white and gray, like cloud coverage, and, above that, a multicolored swath like burlap beneath a dun-brown expanse containing an unidentifiable object in the upper-right corner. Back at ground level, blue-black “burlap,” slung with what appears to be knotted metal hanging over—what?—a window ledge?

Klein herself demonstrates a finely honed practice in seeing. She walks around, observes, and photographs the streets, a process she refers to as “ambulatory meditation.” By means of this physical activity, Klein forges an intimate relationship with place, which is abundantly evident in her work. Klein’s investment of her own time and attention results in an awareness of place as a vessel that, in her words, “contains the past and anchors us to time.” The material world is affected by the passage of time, which, in turn, informs what she sees, and what we see on the



canvas and the page: wear and tear, irregular surfaces, “architecture, botany, fences, screens, and bricks” that combine to create a “dense visual obstacle course” for the viewer. Thus, the experience of seeing becomes almost athletic in its demands: the heart pounds, the breath quickens, the eyes focus and shift and refocus, and, ultimately, we arrive at stillness.

This physical engagement on her part, and ours, is antidote to the habit of thinking, which tends to assert itself the moment our other faculties acquiesce. Klein’s work assists in preventing us from falling prey to passivity by virtue of its textured terrain. Like hikers traversing a rugged landscape in questionable weather, we must remain alert to both “the sky overhead and the mud” underfoot, as Klein makes clear, “shadow and slippage,” objects in space that may be closer—or farther away—than they appear. We are affected by shifts in atmospheric pressure as well as by the tension between bodies: chain links and blossoms; skyscrapers and abstracted landscapes viewed through doors, windows, barbed wire, slats.

Klein’s is a slow process that often involves painting over and sanding off. Her images are thus literally layered and, like the rings in trees or the lines in stratified rock, contain the otherwise uncontainable entity that is time—sometimes apparent, sometimes hidden, sometimes intimated. There is a ruthlessness about Klein’s willingness to rework and revise, as though no matter how long she has invested in a piece, it is not precious or exempt from continued scrutiny. Klein describes a pivotal experience in this regard as having come of an encounter with Tom Burckhardt, who said, “Is it good? Or is it just good enough?” with respect to determining whether or not a piece is finished or resolved. Although admitting that “everything can’t be monumental,” Klein nonetheless holds herself to this rigorous standard.

Drawings, collages, and, recently, cutouts, are “a lot faster” and “physically easier” to execute than her paintings on canvas, which, she reports, vary widely in scale. Consequently, these works on paper provide an opportunity for greater spontaneity and immediacy and a chance to get “unstuck.” Jed Perl, describing an exhibit of cutouts by Henri Matisse at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 2014, writes of his “manic energy” and “triumphant confidence”—the antithesis of the painstaking and belabored. But, for Klein, the magic occurs somewhere in between. She neither relies exclusively on “inspiration” nor does she eschew it.

To this end, she attempts to tune in to her intuition, as all artists must. Intuition is a fundamental part of the process, “tied to the intellect, not separate from it,” explains Klein. “Work intuitively,” she tells herself, “then take a step back and give your work thoughtful criticism . . . then go back to not thinking as you make. It is a back-and-forth. And failure-failure is a great thing.” Failure, for Klein, is an opportunity to change the way you see something, which can, in turn, give rise to something entirely new. “I love failure,” she exclaims.

“Poetry,” writes Georges Braque, “is what distinguishes the cubist paintings Picasso and I arrived at intuitively from the lifeless sort of painting those who followed us tried, with such unfortunate results, to arrive at theoretically.” And Klein is nothing if not a poets’ painter. In her work, we see rhythm and cadence, slant rhyme and meter. More lyric than narrative, her paintings present a linear moments unencumbered by the prosaic elements of plot and character, yet tonally rich and replete with mood and style.

As an undergraduate student of studio art at New York University, Klein studied drawing with Stephen



Ellis, whom she describes as a “hard ass.” She continues: “He wouldn’t let you coast, especially if you had ability.” It was in this context that Klein learned about “perception, discipline, standards of excellence, and teaching.” In graduate school, at the University of Oregon (where Klein earned her MFA in painting, in 2004), Klein worked closely with the artist Amanda Wojick. Primarily a sculptor, Wojick allowed Klein to “explore the space between sculpture and painting” and to play with their fluidity. Klein credits Wojick with showing her that “one can be serious, yet still maintain a playfulness and humor.”

Both Klein and her work exude such a combination of gravity and playfulness to this day. “Work keeps me working,” she claims, and “living, and therefore the fact of death,” motivates and excites her. “Life, death, desire, memory, disappointment, aging, politics, culture”—a curiosity about and engagement with all these things inform her work and also influence her work as a teacher. She seeks to challenge her students to “think critically about everything around them.” Traditional, technical skills may be “important to the development of spatial thinking and perceptual understanding,” but what is essential is that the artist “question, question, question.” Curiosity, Klein insists, is key, as well as a fierce work ethic and the ability to follow through on ideas. The conceptual must be transformed into the tactile, the mind stuff must be made manifest by the hands.

Although Klein often has the sense that her work has evolved considerably over time, she also acknowledges that many ideas dating as far back as graduate school, eleven or twelve years ago, continue to assert themselves; she’s simply approaching them from a different direction, and with a more mature perspective. “We are who we



are,” she concedes. Life experiences may change us, “but the changes that seem momentous inside ourselves may manifest in minor ways outside.” Klein is now slower and more patient and, she hopes, more thoughtful, “a little wiser, more open, and more committed and obsessed. Because in the end,” she writes, “that is what sustains the artist and keeps us coming back again and again: obsession.”

“I just want to never feel comfortable in my practice,” Klein claims; “I want to make work that never finds an answer but keeps engaging with questions.” To this end, intrigued by Bill Brown’s writings on the subject and a talk given by the artist Michael Graves, she has been thinking about object theory, and “the difference between a thing and an object, where the line is, and what it means to make something with no use.” Graves provided Klein with a reading list that she intends to use as a foundation for her research—“and then forget it all so [she] can make things,” she says with a laugh.

Since relocating to Charleston in the fall of 2014, Klein has been focused on larger oil paintings, which she thinks of as pictures rather than objects, with a mind to creating images or “pictorial narratives.” On fellowship in Berlin for the summer of 2015, something shifted. For the first time in four or five years, she began making sculpture, and “thinking about the physical relationship among paintings, drawings, and sculptures.”

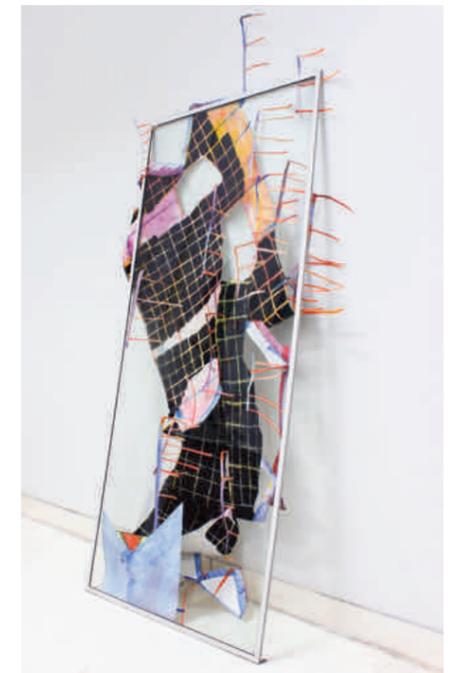
In some of this recent work—large drawings cut and contorted to form three-dimensional sculptures or “urns,” vessels that, in turn, may serve as supports or props for paintings or vice versa—Klein has followed her own dictum to manifest a spatial idea: “things sitting on things” that previously had appeared in her work as imagery. Rather than simply depict the idea of one object supporting another as an image in a painting, her installations involve paintings

serving as actual physical supports for sculptures, and sculptures for paintings. Here, we see the dialogue between concept and creation enacted as if it were a dance.

“Writing about painting is like dancing about architecture,” goes the famous dictum most reliably attributed to Martin Mull, but perhaps all art is, in fact, ekphrastic, a speaking out in an attempt to make vivid a scene or experience that otherwise would remain ineffable. Perhaps the impulse is not folly but evidence of the indefatigable human spirit, undeterred by the futility of its efforts. Or, perhaps, those who would make art of life are indeed shameless fools, but somehow admirable for that.

Art exists on a continuum between concept and craft. Both components are essential. Concept in the absence of craft is philosophy, conjecture. Craft in the absence of concept is merely that. What distinguishes art from crafts is the conceptual element undergirding craftsmanship. What distinguishes art from philosophy is its craftedness, its madeness, its physicality.

To view Susan Klein’s works is to witness—and participate in—this synthesis of thought and form through a visual medium, unmediated and unintruded upon by language. Like all encounters with the transcendent, it is at once a challenging and a liberating experience.



Brit Washburn is a poet and writer devoted to the study and practice of comparative religion, cooking, and parenthood. Born and raised in Northern Michigan, she lived and worked in Brazil, New York, Paris, and Hawaii before settling in Charleston in 2005.