



UNGOVERNED

JULIA DAULT makes her mark at New York's New Museum

BY JOSEPH R. WOLIN

PORTRAIT **GEORGE WHITESIDE**

On the third floor of a vast but nondescript industrial building near the waterfront in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, the walls of Julia Dault's one-room studio practically come alive with the colour and line of more than a dozen abstract paintings that ring the space. Works like these have lately brought the 34-year-old artist increasing attention, and it's easy to see why. Her painting *Untitled (mega brush)* (2011), for instance, features a gloriously sketchy rainbow of pigment stroked in a single wide, interlocking, horizontal swathe across and down a white canvas that measures 72 by 60 inches. In the

Untitled 20, 1:00 PM – 5:30 PM, February 5, 2012
2012 Plexiglas, Formica, Everlast boxing wraps and string 2.24 x 1.4 x 1.17 m PHOTO BENOIT PAULLEY

OPPOSITE: Julia Dault outside her studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, June, 2012



99 Tropical 2011 Oil on vinyl
76.2 x 76.2 cm PHOTO CARY WHITTIER

OPPOSITE: **Wrangler** 2012
Acrylic on canvas and oil on vinyl
91.4 x 61 cm PHOTO MYRIAM BABIN



30-inch-square *99 Tropical* (2011), a striated, transparent blue ribbon tangles vaporously in a gorgeous sunset field that shades from mauve to apricot. Even a nearly monochrome work like *New Wave* (2012) seems to buzz with optical dynamism as inky, white-edged stripes cascade diagonally down its face.

Yet we should not mistake works like these for just pretty pictures. Brainy as well as beautiful, each of Dault's paintings results from a considered approach to the act of applying pigment to a surface. She produces striations and smears, as well as incisive outlines, on her canvases with an arsenal of non-traditional painting tools that includes combs, squeegees and even the flat end of an industrial door handle. Her supports have encompassed not only canvas, but also vinyl and spandex. And the artist's compositional strategies, while improvisatory, draw their impetus from the inherent properties of these materials and implements, and the way they interact with acrylic and oil paint. The spectacular *Bunga Bunga* (2011) evokes an explosion in the gift-wrapping room of Jackson Pollock's house, but its metallic sheen and its sinuous snarl of cursive lineaments derive from the movement of her hand combing white, blue and purple oil across gold imitation-alligator pleather.

Wrangler (2012) glows like a stained-glass window, with multihued disks and concentric semicircles clustered and overlapping on its black ground. Counterintuitively, the colour lies behind the black; we see it through circular windows formed by rotating a toothed tool—of the artist's own manufacture—in black oil on a sheet of clear vinyl stretched over a canvas brushed with bright acrylic paint. As such examples might suggest, we can readily consider Dault's ad hoc attitude toward art-making an "experimental practice," as she says, an appraisal that she admits can appear both "kind of pretentious but kind of true." But the experimental nature of her art is precisely what drives her in the studio. "There has to be that element of surprise," she observes, "to keep me interested."

Dault's paintings foreground the means she uses to create them and draw the viewer's focus to the indexical mark—a mark that bears the trace or imprint of the implement that formed it. These tactics stem from her desire to allow the audience to engage with her work, what she calls an "accessibility of abstraction," but they also inevitably call to mind analogous practices of 1960s and 1970s post-minimalism and process art. Her



action of dragging a comb through oil paint in a semicircle descends, at least in part, from an act like that of Richard Serra flinging molten lead at the base of a wall in 1968. Dault comes by her art-historical bona fides naturally, having grown up in Toronto in a family involved in the arts. Her mother, Maggie Crawford, taught art in high schools and headed the art department of the Scarborough Board of Education; her father is the Canadian art critic and painter Gary Michael Dault. Julia herself has worked as a professional critic, as well: after graduating from McGill in 2001, having majored in both art history and European history, she interned at *Saturday Night* magazine and was the art critic at the *National Post* from 2003 to 2006.

At that point, feeling she was finally ready, and, perhaps, tired of delaying

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the inevitable, Dault took the plunge and decided to become a serious artist. She enrolled in the graduate program in fine arts at Parsons in New York, receiving her MFA in 2008. During her first semester there, she met a guest lecturer, Brian Sholis; they married in 2009. Her work began appearing in group exhibitions almost immediately after her graduation, with solo shows at New York's Blackston Gallery in 2010 and at London's White Cube Bermondsey this summer as part of its "Inside the White Cube" series.

Despite what one might find in her studio at any given time, Dault does not restrict herself to painting. A parallel sculptural practice shares a number of characteristics with her two-dimensional works, yet she makes her sculptures entirely in situ. She starts with large sheets of plexiglas, Formica and tambour, which she rolls and curves, fixing their forms by tying them with string and the fabric strips used to wrap boxers' hands. She then stacks them one atop another, and usually tethers these configurations to a wall. Minimal, abstract and quasi-geometric, the final works appear provisional, precarious and even a bit dangerous, as if they could explode at any moment, an impression not far from the truth. Their tensile energy feels palpable and barely restrained, with strings and wraps pulled taut by panels that seek to spring violently back to their flat state.

Untitled 19, 3:00 PM – 8:30 PM, February 4, 2012 (2012), for example, one of two Dault sculptures shown recently in "The Ungovernables," the 2012 triennial at the New Museum in New York, comprises a large C-curve of iridescent, semitransparent plexiglas nested within a similar but opposite curve in black, the two tied together with a black boxing wrap. On top of them, and squashing them a bit oblong, sits a roll of blue mirrored plexiglas partly covered by two looser arcs of aluminum-striped tambour, one of them partly split, curved against the grain. The work's flashy surfaces impart a certain kitschy appeal, but its simple geometries, coupled with its complexity of pattern and reflection, imbue the tense five-and-a-half-foot-high pile of materials with an undeniable sculptural presence.

As in her paintings, with their manifest manipulation of paint by the artist's tools, Dault's sculptures revel in the signs of their own creation.

**Untitled 19, 3:00 PM – 8:30 PM,
February 4, 2012** 2012
Plexiglas, Tambour, Everlast boxing
wraps and string 1.7 x 1.46 x 1.24 m
PHOTO BENOIT PAILLEY

These works do not partake of any sort of illusionism; they even lack the sense of artistic craft that her paintings possess. But, like them, her sculptures encourage us to imaginatively rehearse her encounters with her chosen materials, to follow along in our minds as she wrestles with the large, unwieldy sheets of stiff plastics and laminates, as she employs her own weight to hold them in place, as she grapples with tying them together, as she lifts, stacks and fastens the components in their ultimate arrangements. Her sculptures, in fact, carry an indicator of this struggle in their titles; each time she installs one, its name is adjusted to reflect the date and time of its construction. These titles, in combination with the legibility of her hands-on methods, imply biographical connotations, even if the biography we intuit encompasses only the performative moment of the sculptures' making. Yet, merely these subtle considerations of the trace of the artist inspire Dault to deeply question the bases of her work, its effect and the possibilities of other choices. "What does it mean," she wonders, "to reinsert a hand into the practice? Is there a way to make work that doesn't put the onus on the viewer to come in and enter my world?"

Even more than her canvases, Dault's sculptures invoke their art-historical precedents. She cites Fred Sandback and Al Taylor as artists she admires, and we can readily see apt models for her practice in the tensile configurations in yarn of the former, or the contingent constructions in wood and other materials of the latter. But we might also think about Serra again, not only his process-oriented actions and his persona of an artist battling mightily with his chosen materials, but also the intimations of danger in his lead antinomy Prop pieces of the late 1960s, held upright by little more than the weight of their component parts leaning against one another. Although fully aware of such relationships, having arrived at her artistic practice from a background in art history and criticism, Dault has had to push them aside in order to give her own work room to breathe. In the studio, she says, "I've managed to quell the voice that asks, 'Well, how does *that* fit into art history?'"

Her production so far spans only a few years, but Dault's obviously thoughtful, patently beautiful and conceptually compelling work has nonetheless begun to find its place within the circuits of contemporary discourse. This year, in addition to the New Museum's triennial, it has appeared in the Marrakech Biennale in Morocco and the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. Her first exhibition in Canada is slated for next year at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects in Toronto. Dault also teaches at Parsons, her alma mater, where her classes have included the intriguingly and intelligently quirky offerings "Unsustainability and Consumerism" and "No Joke: Comedy as Commentary." Dault, however, takes pains to disassociate her artistic practice from prevailing intellectual trendiness, saying, "I'm against a 'laissez-faire aesthetic.'" She borrows the term from the critic Jed Perl, who wrote in 2007 in the *New Republic* that we have been subject to "a flattening of all artistic experience" by an "anything goes" ethos, a "tolerance of everything—high, pop, whatever: a tolerance so bland that it really amounts to indifference." Dault's work implicitly rejects such blandness in favour of an art straightforward in its exploration of materials and process, and almost disarming in its candor. "This is not," Dault says, with what upon consideration seems understatement, "an ironic practice." ■

