



Julia Dault's Color Me Badd marks first solo exhibit

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“This is *Iron Maiden*,” says Julia Dault, swanning toward an ominous black canvas tracked with jagged silvery strokes, and her cheery demeanour conveys a certain sense of mischief. The title of her show here at the Power Plant, which marks the fast-rising 36-year artist’s first solo museum exhibition, confirms as much: Color Me Badd.

It’s a name-check to the early ’90s pop phenom boy band who registered such hits as “I Wanna Sex You Up,” and it wouldn’t seem to have much place here, in one of the country’s high churches of contemporary art, but Dault’s here to offer a little pushback.

“The idea, with the painting at least, is levity,” she says. “It’s a comment on abstraction — should we burden abstract painting with this poetic, philosophical sense? I want it to be open and accessible.”

Now there's an idea. Historically, at least, abstract painting was put forth as something almost holy, with its high priests — Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock — preaching a spiritual purity. Dault means no sacrilege — “I wouldn't want it to be *too* funny,” she smiles — but admits to a sly, necessary subversion.

“I always knew I loved minimalism, and Abstract Expressionism, but you couldn't claim to be making in those ways now,” she says. “So what do you do when you love a certain moment in art history, but realize that it's now?”

You do what Dault does: Mash together the high-modern austerity of form and material with a slickly intuitive sense of colour and play. It helps, too, when every stroke links tightly to the one before.

Dault steps up close to *Iron Maiden* and squints. “This should be sparkling,” she says, something high abstraction should never, ever do. But this is not that, right down to her technique. *Iron Maiden*, with its shimmering skin, is less about laying on than pulling back. “I paint in reverse,” she explains, pointing out that the work is a layering of surfaces that she then peels back in patterns using various tools.

It's oddly mechanical, but strangely imperfect, and the tension of a very human failed rigidity is the piece's strength. It's a wrestle Dault engages with, quite literally, every time she works. In the same gallery, slick coils of luminous Plexiglas are bound with nylon cord, bundled up into imposing candy-coloured forms.

It's called *Untitled 37* — paintings are for levity, she explains; the sculptures “are very taxing, and very special” — and its friendly face belies its coming-to-be.

“Some people think these things come in sections and I just kind of show up and stick them together,” she sighs. “It's a mechanical, industrial esthetic, but it still has to be bent by me in space. I can't have help, I can't preheat. It's me versus the material.”

Why, you might ask, and the answer lies in a little bit of history, both personal and of art itself. It was a thoroughly modern notion for an artist to be guided the materials of their work — think of Henry Moore and his rough, amorphous figures emerging from plaster and stone, but not quite — and Dault's work self-consciously lacking that organic, high-modern primacy is a cheeky bit of subversion that she comes by honestly.

Dault, 36, has a low-key eloquence, and no wonder. Language was always a presence, growing up: Her father is long-time Globe and Mail art critic Gary Michael Dault, and her exposure to art was daily and constant.

In her 20s, Julia took the same path, writing about art for the National Post. “But I was painting in the closet,” she says. “At a certain point, two roads diverged. I had this feeling that maybe you can't be slightly envious of the people you're writing about. So I just decided I didn't want to live that way.”

Sloughing off her Toronto art-world pedigree, she lit out for graduate school in New York (“I needed to strike out on my own, somewhere I didn’t have a byline or a family history,”) and a clean slate.

There, Dault was able to indulge her personal love of a pivotal art-historical moment, where the sacrosanct purity of rough gestural painting crashed headlong into a movement that aimed higher still — so pure, in fact that the artist was barely present.

Minimalists like Sol LeWitt and Dan Flavin assembled workday things — bricks, cubes, fluorescent lights — in a way that suggested anyone could do it, and LeWitt went so far to suggest as much, crafting sets of instructions to recreate his wall drawings for whoever cared to do so.

A few generations later, it’s easy to see such high-minded idealism as quaintly naïve. So what’s a Minimalist-Abstractionist stuck in the 21st century to do? “Well, why can’t you make the case for painting in an abstract fashion and have it be immersed in the everyday, or pop-cultural moments? Because those are all my influences,” she says.

She walks by a suite of works to be hung on a mirrored wall. “That one’s called *Greased Lightning*,” she says, pointing out a small black canvas with a jagged, multi-prong scrape of white. “*Freshmaker, Atlantis, Inner Space, Lady Danger, Heat Wave*. This one,” she stops and bends in close, “is called *Indecent Proposal*. It’s light blue leather, and it’s the idea that the red confronts the blue — almost like they shouldn’t be together.”

Which, when you think about it, kind of encapsulates the split-identity of Dault’s entire oeuvre. “My interest, really, is ‘What can I do as a maker?’ ” she says. “What makes me want to look, and look again?”

Color Me Badd answers both those questions, in the best possible way.

Color Me Badd is on at the Power Plant until the New Year.