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Julia Dault: Beauty at a Complicated Angle

By Sarah Nicole Prickett

We pay a visit to the Canadian artist's Brooklyn studio and take in her latest work. Discussed: creating versus criticism, the logic of colour, and what pretty means.



Julia Dault in her studio. Photo by Jason Mandella.

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Most contemporary artists, and especially contemporary conceptual artists, work from a small set of axioms. Many of the best ones become famous in part for their theorems. But some—and the painter and sculptor Julia Dault is one of them—wrap a whole praxis around proofs, which both demonstrate the artist’s statements and do so in ordinary language, familiar to the eye, that admits some ambiguity in truth. Dault’s in-situ feats of duration and/or tensile strength are untitled and time stamped, ergo the most obviously mathematical. But her tricky-tacky paintings, too, are composed of subtractions done in a certain order, so that, she says, the “logic [of the colours] reveals itself.”

One of her recent canvasses is all black paint scraped in origami shapes to show fish-belly silver underneath, and when the light through a window of her Sunset Park studio falls over it, the silver turns aureate, or rose. When I went to visit her, in March, we talked long enough that I saw almost the whole of it change.

Over a twelve month period, Dault will have had three solo exhibitions: at China Art Objects in Los Angeles, which opened in April; at The Power Plant in her native Toronto, which opens this Saturday (September 20); and, next February, at Marianne Boesky Gallery, which represents her in New York. She is 36 years old. On the day I visited her,

I noticed right away that we were both wearing a version of the Canadian tuxedo, but I didn't say anything.

Julia: Hi! It's been what, four years?

Sarah: I hope not! Three? I wasn't living in New York yet, and you were in the New Museum's Triennial "The Ungovernables" and I interviewed you the same day I first saw your work. I remember us sitting on the floor.

Julia: And now you're here, and you're writing for *Artforum*. I saw your tweet about being its Teen Correspondent.

Sarah: Because I review, like, *Hunger Games* for them! You used to write, too, which is I think why Chris [Frey, Hazlitt editor-in-chief] wants us to have a conversation. You were a critic—mostly for the *National Post*?

Julia: Yes, for the *Post*, from 2003 to 2005. Then, when I decided to make art—I always say that I "came out of the closet" as an artist—I applied to do my Master's in New York, because Canada's art world is smaller. In New York nobody knew my name and that was what I wanted, to start over, or to start anew as an artist who didn't carry the writing with her. Making art while simultaneously writing about others' art wasn't for me.

Sarah: I was thinking about that on the way here. Too many people who write books also review them—literary critics become novelists, or successful authors are always asked to be reviewers. It gets nepotistic, or almost cannibalistic, but somehow it's not considered unethical. In the art world, the gallery politics are harder to navigate.

Julia: Tell me about it. Some artists can do both—Donald Judd, for example— but of course there's a difference between being a critic and being a writer.

Sarah: Barbara Kruger did both, and did both well. But yeah, you can be an appreciator and not a critic. I'm a critic but not often of contemporary art, because I lack the context, and my responses are way too visceral.

Julia: But I think that's valid. I love seeing kids at galleries and museums and watching them interact with work, because they'll see a Sol LeWitt sculpture and it means something to them, but they don't have any language to explain the meaning away. They react with their bodies—or instincts—instead.

Sarah: That's so true. You know this old philistine truism, like, "My kid could paint that"? It should be, "My kid could critique that"! [*Laughter*] I get mad all the time about the way reviews of art shows are written. The other day I read something about "the amorphous intersection of public and private in a liminal zone." I was like, have you ever seen a liminal zone? Nothing intersects there! That is literally the definition of "liminal!" Plus, it just sounds like a press release.



Julia: Or maybe it's that press releases try to sound like *Artforum*, but end up as bad, adulterated versions.

Sarah: Also true. So can I say this very childlike thing, which is that some of your paintings remind me of fabric painting? Like, my mom and my sisters and I used to bedazzle and paint plain T-shirts, and in particular I remember this one black T-shirt all embellished with like these plastic coloured gems in silver paint.

Julia: I know exactly the look you mean. I've always loved craft stores and fabric stores: Michaels and Jo-Ann, and smaller independent stores. I use fabrics in my work, whether directly or indirectly, drawing elements from them such as repeating patterns, specific geometries, and the like. Also, maybe this was before your time, but there used to be these colouring kits containing magic black crayons. You'd colour something, then cover it all in black, and then you'd scratch off the black crayon to reveal the colours underneath.

Sarah: Do you choose the colours before you start?

Julia: Not exactly, but there's a logic to my palettes and patterns. I also build compositions within specific rule sets. I am not, for example, permitted to mix any base

colours, but must respond directly to the industrial colours—straight from the tube. The patterns reveal themselves the longer you look. Many of the paintings are done less by the application of paint and more by the removal of it. I work in layers, and I use various tools to scrape off the topmost layer by hand and reveal the patterns underneath.

Sarah: “The hand” is something I hear a lot about from contemporary artists now.

Julia: Yes. How do you show the hand of the artist when everything you do can be replicated in Photoshop or AutoCAD? When everything can be fabricated or subcontracted? When I make sculptures, I always work alone and on site—without help or pre-planning. I build this way because I want the process and the result to be in perfect equilibrium.

Sarah: Do you prepare at all? Do you know before you go to make the sculpture on site how it will look?

Julia: No. I simultaneously make and think. I always have far more materials at hand than I need.

Sarah: Like overpacking a suitcase for a trip.

Julia: Yes, a little like that—and then I pull together just one outfit.

Sarah: What about when you repeat it? If someone buys a piece, or it goes to another museum, do you fly there and install it again yourself the same way?

Julia: Sometimes I do the reinstallations, other times an assistant will do them. I produce very detailed instruction manuals, with photographs, for each piece. When someone acquires a sculpture—for example, one was just installed at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw—the assistant who is closest to the location will do the installation. I have trained several assistants, who must learn very particular moves and knots. They follow the instructions as closely as possible, with the understanding that the sculpture will never be exactly the same. Upon completion, the assistant’s name is added to the title of the piece. I don’t believe in having invisible assistants. When an assistant makes the work, it’s their labour and they deserve credit.

Sarah: You know, there is really something bodily about the sculptures of yours I’ve seen. It’s like watching ballet, or maybe more like a durational thing. Like you’re walking up to a naked performer bent over and frozen in the middle of the room. You’re waiting for him to tremble or break the surface. It’s sort of anthropomorphizing, but I like thinking of a sculpture breaking character.

Julia: People sometimes tell me that the sculptures feel very powerful as you walk up to them, because they’re so graceful, but they contain so much tension. Or they say that it looks as though the sculpture might fly apart.

Sarah: Has it ever?

Julia: No, it never has. I like the idea of material reciprocity: were a sculpture to break from its position, it would be an instance of the materials overcoming my physical capabilities. In an exhibition, I've always vowed that I would leave it be. I almost wish one would "break"—I want to see what would happen, what it would look like, with the cords dangling from the wall and the sheets flat on the floor. Safety concerns override this desire, however, and though the sculptures look insecure, they are not.



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Sarah: Are there rules for the paintings as specific as the ones for the sculptures?

Julia: Not as specific, but the use of the tool and the idea of removal is foundational. I also have vowed to never name a painting in a poetic or overly sanguine way; the titles reference pop culture, movies, cultural moments, that sort of thing. That one in the corner is called "Indecent Proposal."

Sarah: That's funny. Is it funny?

Julia: The titles point to levity, but I'm in no way being a jokester. I'm definitely not an ironic artist. I try not to take myself too seriously, but it's serious work.

Sarah: And so stylish at the same time. You use so many fashion fabrics. Are you a good shopper? For clothes, I mean.

Julia: I don't know; define "good." Yeah, I guess. It varies. My mother was just in town and we went to Bergdorf's, though that was more tourism than shopping.

Sarah: Maybe it's just age, but I feel like there's no point anymore trying to do cool things in New York. Cool dive bars are the same in every downtown. All I want to do is go with my friends to fancy hotels, like the Ritz or the Eloise, I mean the Plaza, and get one \$20 martini with so much free popcorn and olives. It's the old stuff—I don't mean "old" like the '70s, I mean really old—that makes New York itself.

Julia: Makes it different.

Sarah: Toronto doesn't have as much history. It's becoming sort of Manhattanified, by which I mean it's full of condos and glossy start-ups and Starbucks, but it was never New York, so you have a lot of skyscrapers on no foundation. One or two art museums, very few good institutions for writers and writing. I think it's not a balanced city.

Julia: But do you think it will find a balance eventually?

Sarah: I wonder. Because there are so many good young people there, but the city makes it hard to stay. Or makes it too easy, which is almost worse. And there aren't enough icons! If you're a young artist, who can you look up to who's Canadian and stayed there? General Idea? But—

Julia: No, they didn't stay either. There's John Scott and Julie Voyce; there are a few.

Sarah: Maybe it's not bad to have no icons. But I like history, or provenance. If I love something I go back to find out where it came from.

Julia: That's a nice impulse.

Sarah: Do you remember the first thing you saw and recognized as art, as opposed to simply being an object you liked?

Julia: Not really. I have a terrible memory! But we were always going to galleries and openings. My mom was an art teacher and my dad was a critic, so art was always a presence in our lives.

Sarah: Was there any pressure on you from your parents to be an artist, or work in the arts?

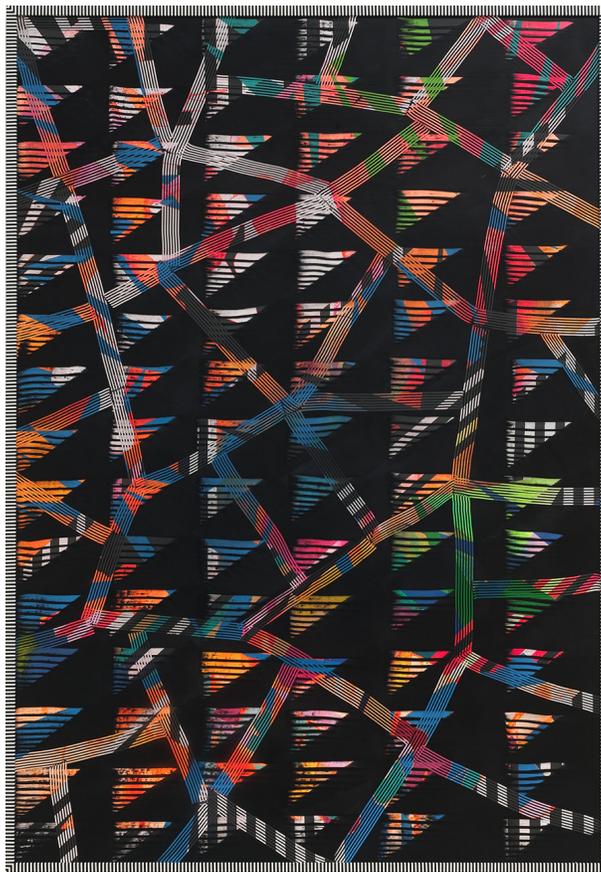
Julia: No, no pressure whatsoever. I mean, it was clear early on that I wasn't going to be a doctor. But there was no expectation. I had always wanted to make art, but took a

circuitous route through a degree in art history and then writing to ready myself for it. Did you?

Sarah: What, did I want to write? Yes—well, it wasn't a choice. It was the only thing I could actually do.

Julia: I'm sure that's not true.

Sarah: It is kind of true! You know, when I was very young I would sit on the porch and write poems about rain, if it was raining, or if we were driving on a long, winding road, I would come out with a short story called "A Long, Winding Road." It was a bit literal. I wasn't a kid genius, but I learned very early to read and write and spell, and I could see words in my head in a way. My dad—when I was like seven—was trying to stump me with spelling words, and he said, "spell 'ceramic.'" I'd never seen the word on a page, nor did I know what a "ceramic" was, but I was like, "c-e-r..."



Julia: How can you remember that?

Sarah: I have a good memory for some things. Especially if you're a reporter, you have to remember! Gay Talese never made a recording. He took the most beautiful notes, though. Now of course you could never get away with that. We live in the Golden Age of Public Relations, in which writers live in terror of misquoting someone, getting screamed

at by a publicist, discredited immediately. It's true that you don't want to misrepresent someone, but the insistence on fact and direct citation doesn't always make for the most truthful profile of someone. Think of the way a painting can feel "truer" than a photo.

Julia: Actually, I want to correct myself—I do have a good memory, but not for childhood stuff. I remember a lot in the world that I see, but not from my past. And I'm great with names. My husband uses me all the time for that.

Sarah: That's very useful. Who are the artists and painters you're looking at right now?

Julia: Well, I have a community of artists I talk with, like Sarah Crowner, who came to see the new paintings yesterday, or my friend in L.A., Alex Olson. I also go through phases. Right now I'm interested in Daan van Golden [*gestures to book on table between us*].

Sarah: I love Nan Goldin! Oh, wait [*actually looks at the book*—Daan van Golden. Well, maybe I'll like him too.

Julia: I'm sure you will. But yeah, it really varies, depending on where I am and where I'm travelling to. My stable includes Ellsworth Kelly, Al Taylor. I really like Charline von Heyl's paintings. They are amazing, but also very close to hideous. She pushes that line so beautifully.

Sarah: Hideous how?

Julia: It's her colours—they're clashy and juxtaposed and weird. That weirdness keeps you looking. An interesting question now is why bother looking? How long do you look for, and why? She answers those questions. She's funny in interviews, too. I think it was in *BOMB Magazine* that she talked about how she's always terrified to start a new painting. But they don't look like she's terrified.

Sarah: I would say that your paintings, conversely, are almost pretty. Because they start from a place of—I don't want to say "bad taste," because beauty isn't obviously equal to good taste, and ugliness isn't the same as bad taste. It's more like those four points form a square, or a rhombus ...

Julia: And in the very centre is *jolie laide*. Like Barbra Streisand. It refers to beauty, but with complicated angles.

Art works featured, in order: Voyager (2014), Escapade (2013). Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, China Art Objects, and Jessica Bradley Gallery.