

# BORDERCROSSINGS

## Imperfect Perfections

### The Art of Julia Dault

[Robert Enright](#) · [Meeka Walsh](#) · [Interviews](#) ·  
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Art is not entertainment and should be taken seriously, especially when it is potentially dangerous. Then it should be treated with respect; awe and pleasure can follow later. Every one of Julia Dault's sculptures is a measure of the artist. Each work could be explosive and each contains inside its dimensions a measure of the artist's force and strength. If you snipped the bands that hold her sculptural work in their assembled forms and could apply an odometer, speedometer, thermometer—some measuring device to record the field of energy that was released—you would have, in speed or light or heat, a biothermal portrait of the artist.

Julia Dault's is work to be reckoned with. She is eyes wide open, has a degree in art history, has worked as an art critic and none of the issues of contemporary art elude her. In the interview that follows she identified in a ready list "the idea of contingency and performance, the place of abstract



Julia Dault, *Untitled 27, 11:15 AM-2:00 PM*, 2013, Plexiglas, Formica, Everlast boxing wraps, dimensions variable. As depicted: 172.1 x 124.5 x 108 cm. Images courtesy of the artist and Jessica Bradley, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

painting and the place of the maker.” Beauty doesn’t frighten her but it’s not an uncomplicated, uninflected beauty she seeks. She wants to engage and involve the viewer in the process and therefore in an individual reading of her work. She wants control—while admitting to an admiration for the gestural work of the Abstract Expressionists, minus the heroic trappings—and achieves this by creating rules and structures, as she says, “looking for frames and assigning logic.” She wants balance—the sculptural works certainly require it—but she also wants the cracks to show, a space for

surprise and discovery to keep it all interesting. A balance too, between process and final form, where perfect equilibrium might obscure the actual achieving. The flaws insure what she describes as a “dirty Minimalism.”

When I saw Dault’s recent sculptures at her exhibition at Jessica Bradley gallery in Toronto in January of this year I thought of Dan Graham, not because they look in any real way like Graham’s pavilions but because of their shared minimalist proclivities, the architectural/structural nature of

Dault's assembly and because of the role of the viewer for both. In Dault's work the transparency is largely procedural or process-based, but it's there. It's not the physical transparency/reflectivity of Graham's glass structures but there is, in Dault's sculptures, and maybe it's there in the paintings too, a kind of semi-opaque, and at the same time translucent quality about their surfaces.

Julia Dault's reluctance to have the assembly and construction of her sculptures observed and documented has, at its core, her further intention of involving the viewer in the apprehension of her work. The process should be apparent in the work itself and not delivered in the manner she dictates. What is important, she says, is that the action be recreated in the mind of the viewer. It could be imagined then in myriad ways, none of them exact repeats. Here's what Josef Albers had to say about individual readings in *Interaction of Color* (Yale University, 1963), about red. "If one says 'Red' (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different." So, while the making of the sculptural works is performative each time, and each time is new, they are private performances for every viewer to reconstruct.

The viewer's engagement is further amplified in Dault's wanting the work to be transparent, for it to exhibit the means of its own making. "I aim for self-evidence," she says about her work being anti-illusionistic. If the seed or essence of the piece is readily apparent the viewer understands it directly,

without mediation. While the manufacture of the sculpture is hands-on, and I can imagine knees and hips as well, being called on to nudge and coax a reluctant and tensile sheet of Plexiglas or Formica into place, the paintings are also evidence of the artist's physical presence. She uses an unorthodox array of tools of her own devising to make them, from combs made from cuts in sheets of rubber, to heavy door handle hardware, to tree branches nobbled at the painting end with thick cotton. The tools standardize her gestures, she says, but the marks remain imperfect because it's still her hand guiding the implement. Here she identifies a mix of the "mechanical and embodied." The results are just as she describes them—a destabilizing mix of what appears to be mechanical reproduction, where forms repeat with consistency and then clearly do not, and a structure that allows for the ordered disorder that poet Allen Ginsberg attributed to the fact that "mind is shapely." Dault's is a fine mind and sensibility. *Friend-z*, 2012, silk and oil on vinyl, over five by almost four feet in dimension, is half spheres and swipes in salmon pink to fresh fish red on the vertical right side of the surface and cool water blues with flashes of leaf green showing through on the other half. The surface activity never pauses and looking, the wonder is how all the animation is stilled long enough for the piece to be



*Steel Magnolias*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, oil on vinyl in painted wood frame, 156.2 x 108 cm. Courtesy the artist and Jessica Bradley, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenschied.

located on a wall. *Heavy Metal*, 2012, oil on metallic canvas, 72 by inches 60 inches does a similar thing, differently. The heavy metal could easily be Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* with its relentless, stylized machinery repeating endlessly in grids and patterns or the blast and body sensation of heavy metal music. It's this piece Julia Dault describes marking with her right hand and thwarting the marks with her left, a choreography of movement on the metallic canvas and in the making.

Two sculptures, *Untitled 26* and *Untitled 27*, both 2013 and both including the time of their making, from outset to completion, and the dates on which they were produced for her exhibition in January at Jessica Bradley, are taut, finely balanced, potentially explosive and luminously beautiful. They very much carry a bodily presence although they are as far from something organic as a work can be. It may be their standing secure on the floor without the intervention of a plinth, or their reliance on the wall for support and completion, adding an element of vulnerability. They, and the paintings are, in their assertiveness, strength, beauty and intelligence, a portrait of the artist.

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