

Jessica Stockholder: Stand-Up Performance

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Opening spread for "Stand-Up Performance" by Daniel Baird, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2012, pp 106–11

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If you read Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried on abstract painting, you get the impression that the art didn't just concern itself with the highest philosophical issues—it was also the apotheosis of the practice of painting. These critics insisted that painting must sharply distinguish itself from the three-dimensional arts; it should work exclusively in two dimensions, with pigment applied to the flat surface of a canvas. The great achievement of abstract painting was to distill this activity to its primordial essence. No wonder the New York school was such an easy target for Tom Wolfe's corrosive wit.

With this background in mind, I wandered through the "Abstract Expressionist New York" exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario last summer with my ten-year-old daughter, Halina. The visit was far more illuminating than I could have imagined. Halina, of course, could care less about the systematic elimination of pictorial illusion and the figure-ground relationship, or the supposed innovativeness of the all-over drip technique. She was drawn to paintings that were playful and evocative, paintings that were a pleasure to look at and fun to fantasize about: the plant and bird forms that whip and swarm across Arshile Gorky's paintings; the great seeping masses of colour that Helen Frankenthaler poured onto her canvases; the primeval animal shapes in Jackson Pollock's *The She-Wolf* (1943) and the murky, shimmering underwater world of *Full Fathom Five* (1947).

Halina did what we all do with compelling works of art before our minds are shaped by, say, art critics—she played, stepping into the paintings' bright, strange, dangerous, beautiful worlds. It didn't matter whether these works were fashioned from paint, or in two or three dimensions. The Gorkys and Pollocks may just as well have been made of wood and vinyl and fabric and sprawled across an entire gallery—and if those artists had started their careers 40 years later, they probably would have been.

It would be a comic understatement to say that art history has not played out as writers like Greenberg prescribed, though such prescriptions—whether made by grizzled, boozy chain-smokers in the 1950s or by brittle Francophile professors in the 1970s—make a business of being wrong.

In the late 1950s, while Greenberg was still in his prime and many of the masterpieces in the "Abstract Expressionist" show were still fresh, Robert Rauschenberg was already slathering paint onto old beds and gathering junk for his great combines, Jasper Johns was sinking anonymous modelled faces above meticulously rendered encaustic targets, Claes Oldenburg was selling goofy plaster hamburgers and hot dogs, and Joe Brainard, Bruce Conner and Ray Johnson were fashioning florid, operatic constructions out of anything they could get their hands on—feathers, costume jewellery, old newspapers, fur. And in the 1970s, even those committed to the history of painting went wildly off script: the hugely under-appreciated Ron Gorchov was creating penumbral abstractions on intricately fabricated concave canvases; Frank Stella, having obliterated illusion and skill from his work, was making virtuoso baroque carnivals of optical illusion; and Elizabeth Murray was covering warped canvases with forms that occupied a space between cartoons and the fierce graffiti seen on New York subway walls.

By the time the 24-year-old Canadian artist [Jessica Stockholder](#) made *My Father's Backyard* (1983)—an old king-size mattress painted red and affixed to a garage wall behind her father's house in Vancouver, above grass and weeds painted a metallic blue—no one really cared anymore about the flatness of the picture plane or the difference between painting and sculpture.



Middle spread for "Stand-Up Performance" by Daniel Baird, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2012, pp 106–11 / artist photo Anna Knott

Stockholder is now one of the most influential artists of her generation; many of the stars that emerged in the latter half of the 1990s (such as [Sarah Sze](#)) are hard to imagine without her precedent. Over the course of a career that has spanned 25 years, Stockholder has shown her work at major venues for contemporary art in Europe and North America—including the Dia Center for the Arts, PS1, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Power Plant—and for the past 12 years she has been the director of graduate studies at Yale University. Although Stockholder's signature installations are often immense in scale—consuming the height and breadth of whole galleries, punching through windows and doors and even walls, insinuating themselves outside into courtyards and gardens—her work is always intimate, even private, like a child's fantasy world. And despite her prominence as an artist and the power that comes with an academic post at a prestigious university (this fall, Stockholder moved to Chicago to become chair of the ambitious [art department at the University of Chicago](#)), she is quiet, low-key and a little

shy.

When I went to visit her at her home outside New Haven, Connecticut, in June, the woman who answered the door of the big, classically Cape Cod house was plainly dressed, with short brown hair and a warm, oval face. Inside, from her spacious kitchen, I could see a garden fringed by stately maples and pines; a side door led into an immense, light-filled studio that she had added onto the original house.

Stockholder was born in Seattle, Washington, the daughter of Jewish intellectuals from New York. Her family moved to Vancouver when she was a year old. "Vancouver was a very WASPy city in those days," she told me as we sat at a worktable in her studio. Most of her belongings had been packed up for the move to Chicago—there were crates everywhere, brightly painted panels leaning up against the walls, and some paper mock-ups of her latest show, "Hollow Places Court in Ash-tree Wood," which opened at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in June.

"I went to a lot of different schools as a kid, and that together with the fact that my parents weren't from Vancouver contributed to my feeling different, especially at school. When I was 14, I asked my parents if I could take a drawing class, and that was that. I just set out being an artist." Stockholder graduated from the University of Victoria with a degree in fine arts. "I started out making paintings, but never really made easel paintings," she said. "My teacher [Mowry Baden](#) was critical of that kind of thinking. What I was really interested in was the materiality of the canvas, of the wall itself—maybe in going through the wall."

Stockholder's relatively tame student work from 1980 looks, in retrospect, restless to expand off and even into the wall: collages with newspaper, strips of cloth and slats of painted veneer, all in colours that are both vibrant and strangely fragile. She has always combined the delicately girly with the outrageously bold.

After completing her BFA in Victoria, Stockholder spent a year in Toronto and then moved south to pursue her MFA at Yale, where she ended up transferring into the sculpture program and studying with artists such as [Mel Bochner](#), [Judy Pfaff](#) and [George Trakas](#). "I started out in the painting program," she recalled, "but soon I moved into sculpture. I was making these paintings that were just sort of stuck to the wall, but I wasn't really interested in making objects, either. I was interested in process and materiality, and the work just organically grew into 'installations'—I hate the term 'installation,' but that's the word everyone uses; I prefer to say I create 'situations'—which for me meant that the work I was making was ephemeral." Stockholder spent a few post-Yale years in a tiny Williamsburg apartment, living off a Canada Council grant and a part-time job at a graphic design studio, and wondering whether a career as an artist was even remotely viable. Then, in the late 1980s, people started paying attention to her work.

In the airy, lyrical *St. Clementines*, which Stockholder did at her artist's studio at PS1 in 1988, crinkled newspaper painted orange is plastered on the wall and curves up onto the ceiling; on the floor is a large, simple, painted shape—a patch of colour. In the wall, a doorframe reveals the backside of another wall, with some pipes snaking through the metal studs. Ripe bananas hang next to the door, and oranges sit on the sill of an open window. In *Mixing Food with The Bed*, which appeared at The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1989, there are various upended appliances and a scrim of newspaper and purple cloth suspended from the ceiling and draped over a wooden wall frame. A long concrete slab with hair (or fur?) mysteriously growing out of it balances on the appliances. And in *It's Not Over 'Til The Fat Lady Sings*, shown at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 1989, wooden furniture and an upholstered chair are stacked into a kind of column or monument,

and old clothes are stuffed between a green sheet-rock and a grey stucco wall. A Stockholder installation can seem like the set for a film adaptation of a magic-realist novel: ordinary, domestic stuff like refrigerators and chairs are in the process of transformation, and the scene invariably involves windows, doors and walls punctured with holes—as though, on the other side, some fantastical kingdom might exist, some civilization of children and the innocent.



Closing spread for "Stand-Up Performance" by Daniel Baird, *Canadian Art*, Winter 2012, pp 106–11

The scope and vocabulary of Stockholder's work, as well as the subtlety of its formal concerns, quickly expanded over the course of the 1990s. The sculptural series *Kissing The Wall* (1988–90) contains thick, gloppy shapes that sit close to a wall. The six works are made of various materials—including small pieces of furniture, sponges, papier mâché, fabric, newspaper and light fixtures—and seem, by turns, light-hearted and darkly sexual. The pieces seem both to kiss the wall and to burst out of its bowels. For *Mary Heilmann* (1990), dedicated to the influential New York-based abstract painter whose work powerfully gestures back to pioneering female artists like Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler, was fashioned from wood, Styrofoam, plaster, sheets, dried fruit, enamel and roofing tar, among other things. The symphony of form and colour includes beams—one partially tarred—running along the floor, newspaper, swathes of orange material, and electric cables hanging from the ceiling. It is a fun house blown open—still fun but vaguely haunted and demonic. In *Cather's Hollow* (1993), cut-up pieces of bathtub painted orange and green serve as three-dimensional tiles on a tilted platform that slants down toward the window, which frames a blue satellite dish mounted on the roof of the building outside.

The spaces in Stockholder's installations (or situations) are fragmented and porous. Colour serves as a fiercely independent yet unifying element. She owes much to the history of abstract painting—her bright forms evoke not just Elizabeth Murray, but also the earlier work of Ellsworth Kelly and the lesser-known American painter Paul Feeley. Yet she refuses to remain within the narrowly pictorial, and the rest of the world—all those refrigerators and cabinets and lamps and fruit—is pulled into her works' beautiful vortex. As she told me, she's more interested in the process of making her work than she is in the finished product, and in her pieces every bit of stray matter serves as a starting point for a process that just might continue on out the door or window, iterating and diffusing into the rest of the world. For Stockholder, everything is figure and everything is ground—at the same time.

Stockholder enjoys feeling rooted in a place; it's no accident that her work is cluttered with the accoutrements of home life. After we spent time in her studio—which might be the one thing she misses when she leaves

for Chicago—she heated pasta with pesto and we lunched at a dining room table with a view of the backyard. Stockholder's home isn't the showy artist's home of the Julian Schnabel or Marina Abramović variety, where every square inch of wall is covered with art, or every doorknob and faucet is specially designed by an important designer. It is the tasteful, well-appointed home of someone who takes pleasure in living well—a sophisticated, successful professional's home.

In the late 1990s, Stockholder was in demand and constantly on the road. It was becoming a problem—especially since, by then, she had a young child. “I missed Vancouver and some piece of me was unhappy with New York—I was never a person who was comfortable constantly going to parties and openings,” she related. “Plus, I was travelling all the time, which meant that I didn't have much of a community of people around me. I applied for the job at Yale as a way of getting out of New York City, and also of changing my life.” Stockholder describes feeling compelled to make art, but admits she doesn't feel this same compulsion to teach; nevertheless, she values teaching and finds it important in her life. She enjoys the shifting values between the academic and commercial worlds in which she participates: “Before, I had to take all of these commissions to make a living, and institutions tended to want me to do the kinds of installations I had already done,” she said. “But I wanted to be able to take on all kinds of different projects, to be able to seize eccentric opportunities.”

Since becoming a member of the Yale sculpture faculty in 1999, Stockholder has continued to develop every aspect of her work and—as she had hoped—to seize eccentric opportunities. The outdoor piece *Flooded Chambers Maid* (2009–10), commissioned by the Madison Square Park Conservancy in Manhattan, consists of a raised platform covered with aluminum fibreglass grating of various colours, wedged between two walkways and accommodating a couple of trees; the platform intersects a square of blue rubber mulch in the ground. The patterns of embedded triangles and warping rectangles are bright, jagged, jazzy and gay. This is playful art. It literally invites children—and kindred adults—to play on it.

For her recent exhibition, “Hollow Places Court in Ash-tree Wood,” she collaborated with the woodworker Clifford Moran and the screen-printer Gary Lichtenstein to transform a dead ash tree cut down from outside the Aldrich Museum into *Hollow Places Fat* and *Hollow Places Thin* (both 2011), a series of folding screens that sat in the middle of the gallery, and a set of screen-printed boards that leaned against a wall. She used printer's ink to apply blue, green, black and red shapes to the screens' smooth surfaces, and cut holes directly through them. *Hollow Places Fat* evokes the Japanese-inspired decorative screens designed by Albert Pinkham Ryder and Louis Tiffany in the late 19th century, but it also makes use of both the pictorial language of abstraction and the material immediacy of sculpture: the holes in the screens underscore the sensuality of the beautiful ash wood. And the work is, as always, slyly personal. “I grew up on the northwest coast and I've always loved trees,” Stockholder told me. “I love northwest-coast totem poles and the way in which they carry picture. Since moving here to the Connecticut suburbs, I've found myself thinking about the lines between private properties and how, like windows, they inform a sense of picture making.

“I miss the Vancouver landscape,” Stockholder said, a little wistfully, as our conversation circled around to her imminent departure. “Although the trajectory of my life hasn't taken me back there thus far.” She continued, “I wasn't planning to leave Yale—I was wooed at the right moment. It's a good moment: the university is making a commitment to the practice of the arts, as evidenced by the building of the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts. The culture at the university is very inclusive—people

seem to enjoy working with one another. They're so friendly it's frightening!"

Moving to Chicago is a new beginning for Stockholder. She is, in a way, coming out of her shell: she'll be serving as the public face of art at the University of Chicago, working intensively with other departments and the university administration, and attending lots of committee and board meetings. There will be cocktail parties and, no doubt, a beautiful studio.

For more works by Jessica Stockholder, visit canadianart.ca/stockholder