

Jessica Stockholder returns to Canada and the landscapes that shaped her work

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Artist Jessica Stockholder poses for a photo in her installation, *The Squared Circle: Ringing* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, on April 17.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Artist Jessica Stockholder has erected a bright yellow wrestling ring on the ground floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto. Visitors aren't permitted to

clamber up there themselves, so they will have to make do with the symbolism: It's a platform.

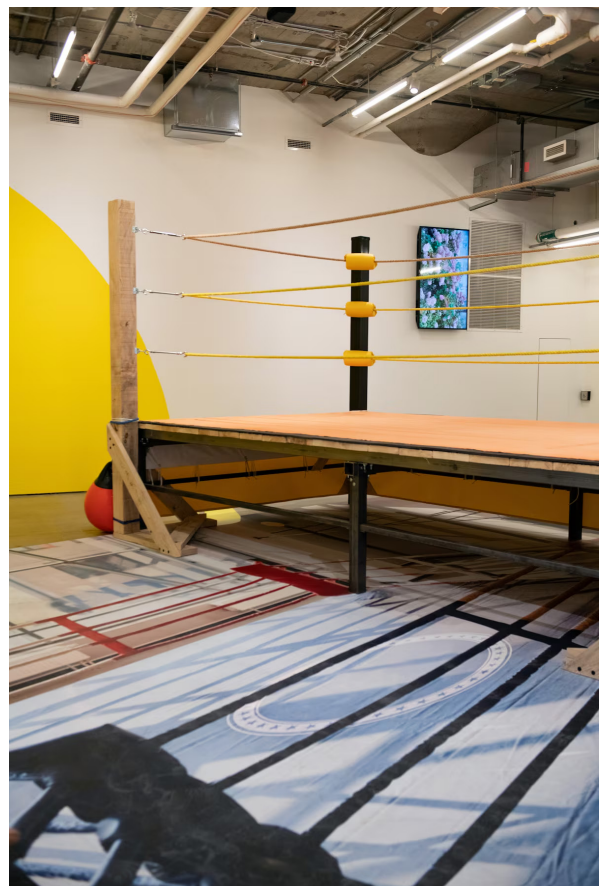
Like a museum, it's a performance space for a controlled encounter. Like the world these days, it's a site for violent display and boastful victory. Yet it is also resolutely cheery, surrounded by walls and floors painted with large geometric shapes in orange, red and green and accompanied by a sculpture made of deconstructed standing lamps and a net of hot-pink cords.

Stockholder, who grew up in Vancouver but made her career in the United States, has taken over the entire lobby space, blurring the lines between her art and the museum's signage and mechanical elements. Wall texts, featuring witty bits of concrete poetry, insert themselves into awkward corners; a video screen hangs alongside an air vent of a similar size.

"It's not a white cube space. A lot of people describe it as difficult to work in," Stockholder said in a recent interview. "There's a front desk, there's two entryways. ... I really had a lot of fun. I sort of welcomed everything about the space. If you are not spending your time wishing for a white cube, it's a lovely space."

"It didn't seem to me a space to plop something in the middle of, to be looked at."

Stockholder, who recently retired from teaching at the University of Chicago and settled in Nanaimo, B.C., made her name creating sculpture that was never plopped down to be looked at. Her international stature as an artist, built up over a 40-year career, is based on dynamic installations that use everyday construction materials as well as lots of painted surfaces to eliminate the distinction between the gallery and the artwork.



She has been particularly busy in Toronto lately. As well as the MOCA show, she curated a recent exhibition of work by the New York artist Elana Herzog at the Koffler Centre.

Herzog's pieces sit somewhere between textile and sculpture, rather the same way Stockholder positions her work between painting and sculpture.

Stockholder says this wrestling ring, created as part of her installation, is more symbolic than her usual work.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In a current show at the Es Baluard Museum in Majorca, she has filled galleries with assemblages of found materials, sheets of wood and basketry, splattered them with colourful paint, then tied the installation together with a giant braided cord that runs from one room to another. In Chicago in 2012, she transformed a major downtown intersection with giant geometric shapes in strong colours by applying vinyl wrap to the ground and up the sides of buildings.



Stockholder's installation takes up entire lobby space, blurring the lines between her art and the museum's signage and mechanical elements.

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The MOCA piece is a second version of a 2021 installation she did in Turin, Italy, where she was asked to curate a show drawing from two European collections of contemporary art at the OGR Torino, an art centre and exhibition hall inside a 19th-century industrial building.

Designing walls in a raw space to hang the art, she considered the relationship between the two – between the content of the art and the shapes of walls and frames. So she began experimenting with the relationship between squares and circles. In the dramatically lit hall, she added a platform, a reference to the museum as a stage. It gradually became a wrestling ring, a space sometimes called the squared circle.

“I’m not a very narrative thinker,” she said. “I’m kind of drawn to formal structure – formal structure is always meaningful. First of all, it’s visceral and then it’s full of significance.”

Still, she agrees that the wrestling ring is perhaps more symbolic than her usual approach.

“As a metaphor for the gallery and the moment we’re living in, yes, I really like it as a metaphor. ... It’s a stage and platform, and all of those words also can be used metaphorically: ‘on the world stage,’ ‘a platform for discussion.’”

As an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia, Stockholder began as a painter and experimented with unstretched canvases that she tacked up on a gallery wall rather than framing. Her instructor criticized these works for lacking a relationship with the wall – it was an era when the role of the institution in presenting art, and the white cube as the space where it was displayed, were much discussed – so she began to experiment by cutting them up and including the gallery as part of an installation.



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Stockholder went on to graduate studies at Yale University and became a sculptor, yet her work always retained lots of flat painted surfaces that recall paintings.

She remembers reading critic Michael Fried's influential 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood*, in which he proposed that art should elevate or transport the viewer into a fictional space. He denounced minimalist sculpture and its use of everyday materials as too pedestrian to achieve that. He accused minimalism, which 50 years later can be seen as the last gasp of high modernism, of being a form of theatre – conscious of a relationship with the viewer. Stockholder wasn't so sure that theatricality, as Fried called it, was a bad thing.

"I agree that it's really important to have a distinction between life and art," she said. "But on the other hand, minimalism got rid of the pedestal, and here we are in a place where all space is charged, and the gallery became a frame for what happens in there. It is pretty theatrical."

So, as art in the 21st century became increasingly concerned with political content, Stockholder built a career advancing the modernist debate over the role of painting and sculpture, creating works that intrigued viewers with their play between flat painted surfaces and the surrounding three-dimensional environment.

Although Stockholder lived in the U.S., she traces her interest in pictorial space to her youth in B.C. Her parents were American academics working in Canada – she moved to Vancouver from Seattle at the age of 1 – and she sees a link between her installations and the West Coast landscape.

“I think my work was resonant with this landscape,” she said, describing the view across the Strait of Georgia, where the islands and the surface of the water create tension between flat planes and three-dimensional space. “Everything flattens, even while you know you’re looking through deep space.”

It was in this setting that she became interested in both looking at a picture plane and physically experiencing space, the two strands that come together in her work. She was also deeply influenced by Northwest Coast Indigenous art, noting its enduring presence in the environment in which she grew up.

She has returned to that landscape now, retiring with her Canadian husband, the painter Patrick Chamberlain, to Nanaimo to be closer to family. It’s a return that has proved joyful at a personal level and invigorating for her work.

“I really value having roots and being from here. At this time in my life, I’m appreciating knitting things together.”

The Squared Circle: Ringing by Jessica Stockholder is showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto until Aug. 3.