

Jessica Stockholder



in conversation with Lisa Catt

A few years ago you co-curated and exhibited in **The jewel thief**, an exhibition of contemporary abstraction at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. Was there something in particular that you wanted this exhibition to say about abstraction?

Interestingly, I don't think I noticed the subject was abstraction until the exhibition was almost finished. In my own work I don't understand abstraction to be distinct from figuration or representation. I was on a panel many years ago at Yale University titled 'What is abstraction?' and that experience prompted me to ask, 'Well, is my work abstract?' I would actually say my work is concrete; it's a matter of fact. Since then I've spent a lot of time thinking about how abstraction is embedded in everything we do and think.

Your work in **Unpainting, Two frames** 2007, is very matter-of-fact in both its presence in the gallery and its introduction of the motif of the frame.

Framing is always part of the subject of my work; and the transgression of the frame. We can't think about, or see anything, without creating edges. Whether it's a physical, visual or conceptual edge, we need to think and understand within precise limits: we don't take in the whole of the universe. In my work, literal frames function also as metaphoric frames

This definitely comes to the fore in the context of 'the gallery' and traditional systems of display and interpretation.

Yes, the gallery functions as a kind of frame, as do pedestals – they present objects as separate from the flow of the rest of life. I think the emphasis on the white cube in gallery spaces has changed and is still changing. But in the world I grew up into, this dialogue around Brian O'Doherty's **Inside the white cube** essays was in the air.¹

So when these distinctions between object and gallery space, frame and surface are jumbled, as they are in your work, there is a moment when viewers are likely to ask, 'how should I approach this object?'

That question, or process of coming to understand and exploring on my end, is what I'm sharing with viewers. I'm interested in how our perceptions and feelings and understanding of the world are informed by the frames of our thinking. I'm always trying to get past the edges of my own understanding and pull the rug out from under myself.

Another way to look at it might be to say that I'm making chaos for myself, pulling lots and lots of stuff into the work that I then have to find a way to make sense of and to impose some kind of order. This process inside of my work is how we make sense of the world generally – we try to order things by bringing structured thought to the chaotic experience of being alive. So my work is full of loose ends and elbows sticking out in awareness of this experience. But in the end, it is very formal, and kind of static insofar as it relies on pictorial structure to cohere.

For example, in **Two frames** there's a hole under the light and the roundness of that hole is then quoted by the roundness of the child's chair and the orange plastic thing and the washers under the round screw heads. In response to those formal repetitions I have drilled a hole in the wood adding another round shape. It's interesting to notice that there is actually a limited range of forms in the human-made world – lots of rectangles, round things, geometry. For that reason, working with serendipity, as I often do, does not lead the work away from formal coherence – quite the opposite.

Has that surprised you, just how predictable or how repetitious the things that make up our lives are?

It's something that I've become more focused on in the last couple years. I've noticed that wishing to find forms that are wild and unpredictable, I often have to look outside of the human-made landscape. So more eccentric forms, like the yarn hanging out of the bottom and the bent cable in **Two frames**, are harder to come by.

extend sides of image

Jessica Stockholder
Two frames 2007
plastic, children's chair,
fake fur, vinyl, halogen light
and fixture, weight, bracket,
cable, extension cord,
garbage bag, yarn, beads,
acrylic and oil paint,
wooden drawer, metal

What about colour, is that another way to bring order to chaos?

Colour is so complex. Every little change brings an enormous change relative to the colours around it. The possibilities are endless in terms of tone and hue and how things can be shifted. I aim for balance in colour and also a charge. So I would agree with you – the work is organised. I think that it is both optimistic and upbeat, proposing a kind of joie de vivre, and it's doing so in the face of difficulty.

Also, colour is something that I can control. I choose objects, but the colour range is less precise than what is available by mixing paint. Looking at **Two frames**: paint wouldn't stick to that orange plastic in the middle, so that's why there's that piece of fur painted pink and also this circle of adhesive foil. If paint did stick to that orange plastic, there would probably be paint on it. That said, I appreciate the richness that's generated by this kind of problem.

How do you go about sourcing your materials?

Sometimes I know what I need and I go buy it. Sometimes I have stuff lying around in the studio. Some stuff is cast off from my house. Occasionally, I come across something on the sidewalk. And sometimes my studio is empty and I just have to go shopping and see what I can find. In **Two frames**, I started with the piece of cast-off furniture. But then I wanted to frame that piece of plastic so I had to go buy the frame. Also I wanted to hang it so I had to go buy the bracket.

So there is a practical or functional nature to the materials you use?

There are certainly places where the materials function as one would expect. But I'm also

interested in other qualities of the materials – by the fact that electricity is running through the wires, that there's yellow meeting white meeting pink embodied by the cables, the texture of the surface of the plastic and the different surface of the pink chair. I'm interested in creating a situation in which the qualities of materials and objects and shapes can be seen distinct from the words we put to them. Our words allow us to be efficient and my work allows for a moment disrupting the efficient habit of thought.

You mention the electricity running through the wires and in **Two frames**, with its network of forms, you get the sense of a circuit running to and from the wall. Can you talk a little bit about this sense of connection between the architecture and the work?

I like that electricity is an active element that is part and parcel of architecture – which, like my artwork, is static. So the static artwork is plugged into the static building. But because we know that electricity moves, that it's running through wires behind the wall, there's an eventfulness to a light being plugged in. I understand the work to be woven into the structure of the world around it.

The surface of the wall, covering up the wires that carry electricity and the plumbing behind it, is also full of potential fiction, potential illusion. The wall presents us with a kind of skin that makes us feel comfortable. As time moves along, people are less and less aware of what's behind the skin of things. My work is very much about revealing how valuable those illusions are and how they are knit to the structures that support them. I'm not interested in hiding things.

1. Brian O'Doherty, Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space, Lapis Press, Santa Monica, 1986. The essays in this book originally appeared in Artforum magazine in 1976.