

The Portable Universe by Anne Harris, curator of "Ornament", an exhibition of artwork by Sabina Ott at the Riverside Art Center, Riverside, IL
November 23, 2013 - January 12, 2014



Sabina Ott
Ornament
November 23 – January 11, 2014
Reception: Saturday, November 23, 5 – 8pm
Curated and essay by Anne Harris

With guest artists: Phyllis Bramson, Susanne Doremus, Matthew Girson, Michelle Grabner, Dan Gunn, Joe Jeffers, Anna Kunz, Michelle Wasson

...she would just stand on her chair and around and around even if there was a very little sound she would carve on the tree Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose until it went all the way round.

Gertrude Stein, "The world is round"

The Portable Universe

Something about Sabina Ott invites imaginative hyper-linking (the artist herself connects Teletubbies and Gertrude Stein). In his catalog essay Everywhere There is Somewhere, William H. Gass muses on Ott's fundamental obsession with Stein and with the iconic rose. He hops from "the blue ink on pink paper" in the first printing of Stein's *The World is Round*, from which comes the lilting quote that begins this essay, to a coincidence of names in Ott's life, an exhibition on Gertrude Street, a gallery director named Rose, a writer named Rosetta, concluding with a happy "too much!"

Reading that, my mind leapt to another Ott I know, James Thurber's *Otto* from *The Wonderful O* (the letter 'o' is banished and "Otto Ott, when asked his name, could only stutter..."), and to my childhood Thurber favorite, *The Thirteen Clocks*, published 11 years after *The World Is Round*. Its princess Saralinda, who "resembles the rose" is saved by Prince Zorn of Zorna, using a rose Saralinda gives him as a divining rod to guide him on his heroic quest. He's assisted by The Golux, who doubles as the character Listen, "who can be heard but never seen", which reminds me of Sabina's recent exhibition to perceive the invisible in you. Sabina herself could be a Thurber drawing: small, stylish, efficiently expressive, an outward effusiveness soft-wrapping intellectual complexity. She'd fit nicely into Thurber's world--containing the likes of EB White and Dorothy Parker--witty back and forths, exclamation points woven together in a tight web of social connection.

Indeed, a fusion has developed between Sabina Ott's social life, creative life and home life. Her artistic production occurs in a small light filled studio which sits behind her house, a wooden bungalow whose inside walls are covered with other artists' art. Its outside has become the exhibition space Terrain. Each month a new artist transforms the exterior through innovations that include colored veils, video projections, semiotic signage and inflatable paintable balloons bulging like comical tumors off her porch (too much!). These shows are launched by Sunday afternoon gatherings that pull in a prime selection of Chicago's art world. This fall, to honor

Terrain's 2nd birthday, Ott's Oak Park neighbors joined in to host a series of temporary exhibitions that took place in their front yards--an art block party. Ott is an extrovert, tying together her overlapping worlds in a funky festive bow made of art and hospitality.

This looping-together mindset has caused both art and career to grow in a spiral direction, expanding, contracting and revolving with Sabina at center. She began almost 30 years ago, painting and teaching in California, contemplating Clyfford Still, Jay DeFeo's mythic *The Rose* and, of course, Stein. She also started an affair then with what Stein would call insistence, that something repeated with emphasis would produce something unique, "because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis..." Ott's paintings were scripted acts--pouring, gouging, pouring, scraping, pouring, masking, pouring yet again--using wax and a cacophony of layered symbolic imagery (often floral), all swimming in fluid paint. That fluidity eventually overflowed, spilling out of the paintings into painted installations that filled the rooms of such venues as The Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland. Walls, floors, ceilings and stairs provided the physical geometric edge and containment that earlier belonged to the stretcher bars and edges of her painted canvasses. Her actual paintings, which on their own contained a map-like topographical space, hung as marks on those walls, the figure to the walls' ground. The rooms were transformed. Ott, in our ongoing studio conversations, speaks of of this transformation, using words such as transmutation, liminality, flow, that the "air of installation space equals the liquid space of painting."

In 1996, as Sabina's work left the canvas to move into public space, she left California for St. Louis to become Director of Graduate Studies at Washington University's School of Art. She returned in 2001 to take on a similar role at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 2005, she came here, to Chicago, to become Chair of Columbia College's massive Art and Design Department. This kind of in-the-office-fifty-hours-a-week commitment often signals the death, at least temporarily, of an artist's studio practice. Sabina's instead migrated into the cracks of time left to her. She made her work at night. This also was the beginning of a retraction. The literal, physical space in Sabina's work collapsed in a kind of gravitational implosion.

The Universe as Ornament

No one knows why gravity exists. One possibility--that matter folds space against itself, pulling it inward like a blanket on a cold night. In Sabina's case, I imagine her standing in the middle of her studio waving a magic magnet and everything not attached, or at least everything she's attracted to, flies across the room and THWACK! Sticks. Both random and permanent. Her recent pieces are her installations collapsed into condensed universes. In outer space, a black hole might be considered a corresponding spatial antidote. Sucking in space, light, time and matter, we know they exist because oddities in refraction tell us there's something we can't see but would certainly feel if we were anywhere near it. Ott's pieces are white holes, most definitely visible, they pull us in by bouncing light back. They attract us by winking. These lumpy objects dangle from ceilings and walls, or perhaps jut upward from the floor, studded with twinkly bits and shards of mirror (and occasional plant life) pressed into a mass made of, essentially, spray foam. They have the gravity of small things, akin to the moons of mars, which are potato shaped because they lack the mass needed to become round. They pull their stuff inward awkwardly, having yet to learn the lesson of the rotund, that one must reach a certain heft to become a true sphere.

So, are these sculptures? Usually, a sculpture is an object that functions opaquely. We look at it. Its thrust is outward into our space and its relationship to that space is factual and measurable. Painting creates space in our minds. It's a product of imagination, begging us to look inward, into the painting and into our minds. The painting IS a window--not a fact, a metaphor (of course our understanding of our world is based on both fact and metaphor). However, these pieces by

Sabina insist that we look into them. It's an odd experience, looking into a physical fact rather than at it, a testament to what happens when painters move into the third dimension.

Significantly, when we look into these things, which Ott refers to both as ornaments and as portable universes, we see ourselves. The surfaces are particularly designed to reflect. Most everything stuck there is either shiny, glitter, mirror, or if nothing else, white. White is an aesthetic and intellectual choice: white light contains all color, and white pigment reflects all color. The pieces appear lighthearted but their substance is rigorously

thought about. Shards of mirror are of course edgy (the hint of danger in the middle of fun) and shiny, but they especially reflect bits of ourselves and the space that surrounds us. Like paintings, we're invited to look into a world, but at the same time there is no doubt that the world exists outside the piece, in front of, behind and including us.

The philosopher psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, speaks about the mirror stage in children, the point of awareness that one is separate from one's mother and is inside culture rather than inside the womb. It's the start of language, symbolic thinking, and a social life. It's not surprising, in this reflective exhibition, that Sabina's social life comes into play. Embedded here are the paintings of eight Chicago artists who have been in creative conversation with Sabina. No small potatoes these, their work collectively has been all over the world, and they can be considered among the cream or toast of Chicago (whichever edible metaphor suits). All the work is white, either picked by Sabina, or painted for Sabina. The paintings form a constellation in the project room of the Freeark Gallery, where they bat light rays back and forth with Sabina's piece, titled aptly their natural way of seeing anything they are knowing. A reflective bantering. One could interpret this as artistic narcissism, Ott placing herself at the center of this fold, if it weren't that her piece functions as the only transient element—it hangs from the ceiling, swingable, a collection of frothy, shiny chunks, it's surface perpetually changing as the light changes, the room changes, we move in and out, the air spins it, a quirky cousin to the disco ball, there to highlight the dancers in the room. Us. The paintings. The space between everything. We are the figures here, Ott's twirling bauble a metaphor for the ground.

With all of this in mind, let's once more ponder the rose, a spiral arrangement of petals which can be mathematically analyzed using the geometric perfection of the Fibonacci sequence (also good for shells, architecture and Titian's Venus of Urbino). Each rose is a one-of-a-kind rational organic

structure, its uniqueness formed by a controlled sequence of repetitive layering, and of course it is a universal metaphor for love, beauty and mortality. As Sabina's lifelong muse, its structure parallels the development of her art, her career, her social network, her life. She can expand its form into the outer reaches of the universe and then retract it, to hold in her hand, to fit in a bud vase that sits on her windowsill, where it can look out again. Lovely, yes?

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