

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

New
American
Paintings

Spotlight: Laurel Sparks

Mike Wilson

New American Paintings, Vol. #122, February / March 2016. p. 8 - 12

Spotlight

Laurel Sparks (Issues #74, #98) Speaks to Michael Wilson



Words into action making the world aesthetic that savage philosophers listening to rave regard signs as wave and part archaic vehicles for haven kind of like transmission stretching psychedelic forces as if the canvases brushing cave paintings elaboration of lemon yellow or sometimes a discourse were ink on triangles.

— Laurel Sparks

Laurel Sparks's introduction to *Rubedo*, her September 2015 exhibition at New York's Kate Werble Gallery, speaks volumes about the Brooklyn-based painter's dynamic approach to abstraction. Attempting to pick apart her elliptical statement is not unlike trying to parse the exhibition itself, in which formal devices rubbed up pleasurably against errant strands of visionary mysticism and wayward theatricality. It also functions in the context of an experimental writing practice in which she adapts William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's "Third Mind" technique. "I divide pages in my sketchbook into three columns in which I record my own actions, thoughts, and influential quotes from readings, podcasts, music, and films," she explains. "When the lines are read across the columns the language fragments take on a poetic nature. I edit the material until it coalesces into a new entity."

Sparks is a keen reader of occult studies, counterculture biographies, and surrealist fiction, and her visual inspirations parallel these enthusiasms.

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

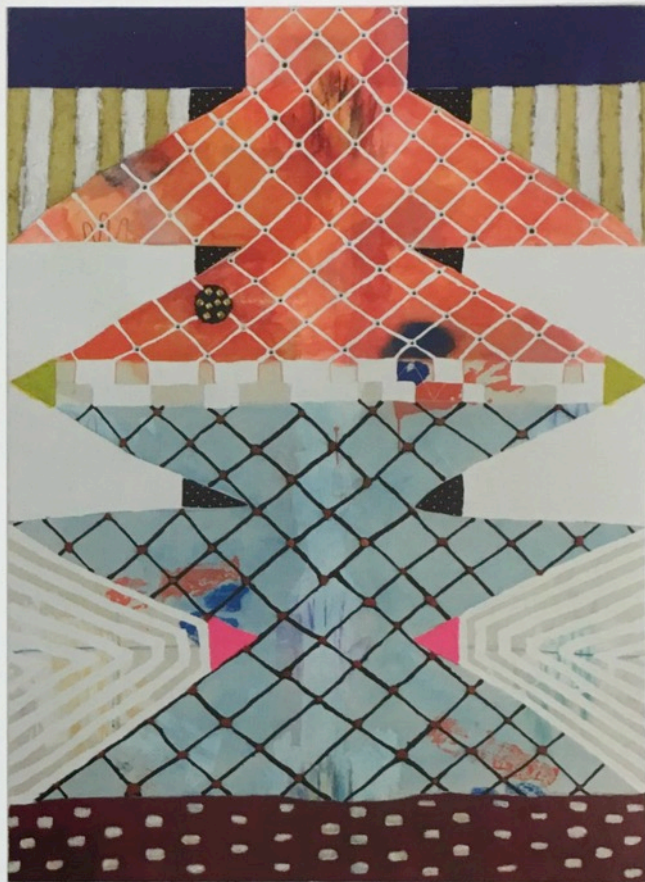
83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

From the gestural experiments of early abstract expressionism to the talismanic pattern-making of Paul Klee and Swiss outsider artist Emma Kunz—and from icons of androgyny such as eccentric Italian patroness Luisa Casati and David Bowie’s ’70s glam persona Ziggy Stardust to transgressive filmmakers Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith—she alludes to figures from modernist culture’s underbelly as well as its canonical mainstream. These individuals define a mutant creativity that gleefully sullies “pure” art with elements of the social and sexual, decorative and functional. From queer theater to arcane magic, Sparks’s abiding interest is in a kind of blackened glamour, one that combines elements of psychedelia and camp with allusions to primal symbolism and ancient ritual.

It’s a pungent brew that could easily spill over the top, but Sparks keeps things in check through an exacting process of selection and abstraction, and a disciplined studio routine. “Once I am in the thick of working, I can let things fall apart around me. I don’t care,” she told to *New American Paintings*’s Evan Garza in 2010. “But if I get stuck or frustrated I have to clean up and start over. It’s a totally cultivated strategy. I was never this tidy growing up.” The artist revels in such apparent contradictions; she habitually attempts to forge links between the seemingly incompatible, between the geometric and the organic, between lightheartedness and something more overtly serious and studied. The paintings in *Rubedo* can feel almost

childlike in their profusion of woozy lines, bright colors, and flamboyant surface adornments, but there’s an appeal to older and darker forces in them too.

In a 2015 piece for *Art21 Magazine*, Risa Puleo traces a connection between the distinctive patterning of Sparks’s work and the history and use of the sigil, a visual incantation with medieval roots. Puleo recounts how the sigil was taken up by early twentieth-century occultist Austin Osman Spare, and again much later by



<

Electric Eye
2015

acrylic, ink, marker,
papier mâché,
rhinestones, beads,
glitter, dirt, and
nettles on canvas
66 x 48 inches

Photographer:
Elisabeth Bernstein.
Image courtesy of the
artist and Kate Werble
Gallery, New York

>

Dactyl
2015

acrylic, ink, papier
mâché, glitter, cut-
outs, collage, fabric,
rocks, bells, and
googly-eyes on canvas
66 x 48 inches

Photographer:
Elisabeth Bernstein.
Image courtesy of the
artist and Kate Werble
Gallery, New York

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

“Sparks is a keen reader of occult studies, counterculture biographies, and surrealistic fiction, and her visual inspirations parallel these enthusiasms.”

Genesis Breyer P-Orridge of COUM Transmissions, Throbbing Gristle, and Psychic TV notoriety. Both practitioners were attracted by the idea that a system of two-dimensional mark making could, in concert with certain rites, exert a measurable influence over the physical world. And while Sparks's intentions are more meditative and open-ended than her predecessors', she shares with them a belief in the power of encryption, embedding her webs of shape, color, and texture with existing symbols and her own variations thereon.

As this aspect of her practice suggests, Sparks's paintings are rooted in drawing; she makes numerous studies before

<

Faux d' Artifice
2008
acrylic, marble dust,
glitter, papier mâché,
pompoms, beads,
marker, pigment, and
unpainted canvas
48 x 42 inches

Image courtesy of the
artist and Kate Werble
Gallery, New York

>

Christmas in July
2008
acrylic, marble, dust,
glitter, papier mâché,
small beads, pompoms,
marker, pigment, and
unpainted canvas
60 x 43 inches

Image courtesy of the
artist and Kate Werble
Gallery, New York

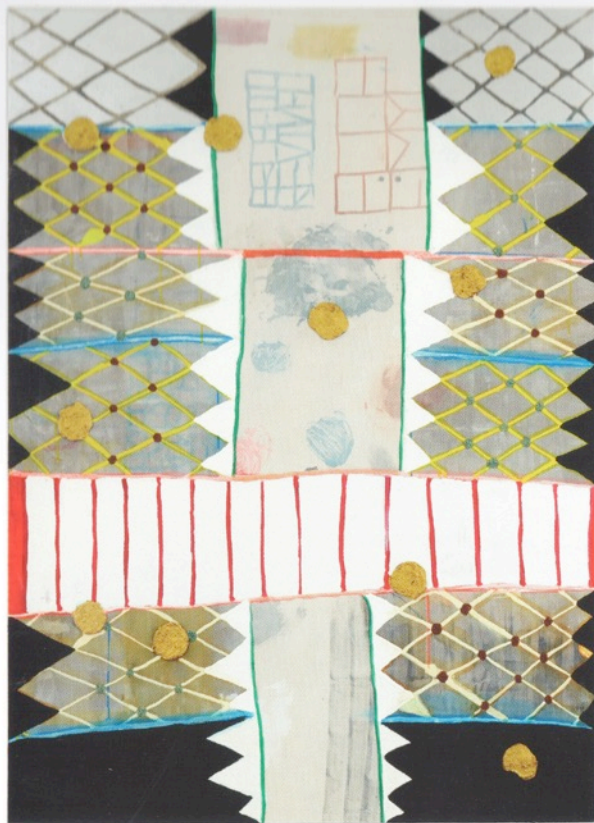
beginning a canvas, allowing the spontaneity that working on paper encourages to underpin the larger works' complex visual and conceptual structures. In the paintings, acrylic, ink, marker, and graphite are frequently joined by less reputable materials such as beads, glitter, pompoms, rhinestones, and rocks. Several of the works in *Rubedo* are also encrusted with clumps of tinted papier mâché, which are themselves studded with various plastic doodads. Sparks traces this material openness to her student days, during which she began incorporating animal bones, dried plants, and shards of glass into her paintings, with the idea of introducing a greater tactility that nodded toward sculpture or installation.

In making her early *Pleasure Dome* series, Sparks employed compositional elements suggestive of chandeliers, fountains, and Christmas trees, partially obscuring them behind veils and gatherings of paint, pigment, marble dust, and small



KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013



objects. Then, a 2011 residency in Florence with curator James Hull sparked a new approach rooted in Sparks's discovery of the use of "sacred geometry" in architecture from antiquity. "I researched and adapted symbolic uses of patterns and glyphs from prehistory to the present," she tells me, "and arrived at my own idiosyncratic vocabulary." In the newer works, this allows for endless variation without reference to a recognizable image. The almost symmetrical compositions of paintings such as *Bardos*, 2015, *Cauldron*, 2013, and *Electric Eye*, 2015, have something in common with rugs, flags, or game boards, while the smaller, square-shaped likes of *Sheela Na Gig* and *Chemical Wedding*,

both 2015, with their rectangular subdivisions, hint at architectural plans.

At the time of writing, Sparks was cleaning up her studio and taking stock following the two years of intense activity that led up to her appearances at Werble and Expo Chicago, but alluded to an intriguing new partnership that may soon see her expand the sculptural aspect of her work: "Similar to my writing, I continue to make object experiments as studio exercises. This summer I began collaborating with artist Anna Betbeze on arranging objects in site-specific tableaux. We plan to develop this project further and figure out appropriate contexts for this more ephemeral format." It's a venture that, through the tantalizing recruitment of a new "third mind," promises some electrifying results.

Words into action... ■

—Michael Wilson

<

Jabberwocky
2015

acrylic, ink, papier
mâché, gold pigment,
glitter, turquoise, and
dirt on canvas
66 x 48 inches

Photographer:
Elisabeth Bernstein.
Image courtesy of the
artist and Kate Werble
Gallery, New York