

Interview

JULIA DAULT'S MARK

BY SAVANNAH O'LEARY

PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTOPHER GABELLO



Last Friday, the exhibition "Maker's Mark" opened at Marianne Boesky Gallery, in which Toronto-native, Brooklyn-based artist Julia Dault continues her exploration of artistic processes with a series of abstract paintings and sculptures. From Morocco to Zurich, Dault's work has created buzz around the world, but this exhibition marks her first solo show in the city she calls home.

Her sculptures involve fluorescent, industrial sheets of Formica and Plexiglas that have been wrestled into

impossible forms. Without the help of any transparent adhesives like glue or liquid cement, the artist forces the stubborn materials into curves bounded with cord. Each sculpture seems likely to burst at any moment, and one can't help but interpret them as triumphs of physical exertion. Themes of labor are further indicated by the title of each sculpture, which reflect the amount of time they took to build. Concurrently, Dault's paintings are also imbued with a teeming sense of energy. Using unconventional tools like sponges, combs, and textured fabrics, Dault scratches through layers of paint to reveal spasms of color in geometric patterns.

We met Dault just before the opening to discuss the roots of her fascination with the artist's hand.

SAVANNAH O'LEARY: There is a specific vocabulary that people use when writing about you and your work—the word "rules" pops up a lot. Why are these self-imposed constraints so important to your work?

JULIA DAULT: It's probably the melding of art and life. If you think about what an artist can do now, it's essentially anything. Working within the great abyss is existentially overwhelming, so as a person, I thrive within self-imposed constraints and in my practice I apply the same methods. For example, with the Plexiglas sculptures, all the sheets are industrially cut; I can't affect them in any way. I find that once I establish these constraints, the options are still infinite. It's not like I'm circumscribing myself, it's just an approach. It's far more...existentially sound. *[laughs]*

Additionally, I find that it is within constraints—somewhat counter-intuitively—that I find surprise and spontaneity. The rules control the terms, but don't dictate the results. So with each sculpture or painting, there is a new and unpredictable element at play. I suppose in a sense, nothing is surprising if everything is allowed; I'd miss out on this playful and experimental element—an important part of my practice—without working within rule sets.

O'LEARY: Speaking of rules, I remember from meeting you years ago that you are very careful about having people watch you while you work. Why so much focus on privacy?

DAULT: If you just talk about the sculptures, a lot of journalists have asked if they can sit and watch the whole thing come to fruition. I build them such that you can see how the thing is held; I call them self-evident. You can see knots, and you can tell that these sheets are anchored. The rules are that I can't use glue because you can't see it, and they can't be pre-bent because you wouldn't be able to see that activity happen. So given that they are performative, if I were to have them be *publicly* performative, there wouldn't be any mystery. The way that it is now, the way that I've set it up, you see how it's held together, you see the title and that it was made during a particular time period on a particular date. Then in the mind's eye, the viewer has to piece together the labor, or the activity, from one point to the other. I feel if it were all laid out, there would be nothing to discover. I'm interested in finding balance between the process and the final form. It's not just process art; the way that it looks in its final form is really important, and yet how I get there—making that transparent—is important too.

When I do various shows, like at the Gwangju Biennale [in South Korea], this team of videographers wanted to film me as I was making it. My worst nightmare would be—let's say I'm long gone years from now, you'd have the sculpture, and then right next to it, a video of me building it. That would take all the

mystery out of it.

O'LEARY: Which isn't rare. I see that at exhibitions all the time.

DAULT: Yeah. I'm definitely against it. *[laughs]*

O'LEARY: Is the building process as athletic as I picture it to be? Are you exhausted after you make these sculptures?

DAULT: It is physically demanding. I think if it weren't, let's say I was building with something light and easy to handle like pieces of paper, it wouldn't have the same impact. I don't know if a viewer does this, but I would imagine you picture yourself in the position of the artist or the position of the maker. I like that you can see weight, you can see the volume or mass. You can see that these things are really heavy, even if you're not touching them, and that's very important to me.

O'LEARY: The sculptures are site-specific and you've said they're also very spontaneous in that sense. How much planning goes into it? Do you go to the gallery and study the space in advance?

DAULT: I always know where I'm going to be building. If it's really far away I get a floor plan and photos of the space, but that's it. I don't sit down and start drawing potential forms that I might use, and I don't preplan the colors or the order that I'm going to be doing, and I always bring more than I need. I always bring in a spectrum of these beautiful sheets of color and I just begin playing in the space and seeing what works and what doesn't. So yeah, it's extremely site specific. In a way, I do that because I'm interested in turning the site of an exhibition into a site of production. Rather than having everything made in a studio and then shipped and thrown into the space it's shown, it's about taking the artistic labor—the making—and having it be in the place where the thing is shown, so it has a stronger relationship to the viewing experience.

O'LEARY: In this exhibition, I noticed some of the patterns from the paintings will be reproduced on the plastic of a sculpture. Do you usually borrow from different pieces of work to integrate into others?

DAULT: This is the first time I'm taking a pattern and translating it over into another medium. This will be the first time I'm doing that with the sculptures, which I'm really excited about.

O'LEARY: Where did that idea come from?

DAULT: I've been working with these patterns and silks and various quotidian traditional surfaces for a while, and I often think about the relationship between a painting and a sculpture. There's this one pattern in particular that I've chosen to work with that I am obsessed with. It's graphic, it's black and white, and it has logic to it, yet it breaks down at moments. It's completely gripping because you try to trace the repeats. So it as a painting is in the show, and then it as a sculpture will be too. Bringing the two sides of the practice into closer proximity has been a real interest of mine.

O'LEARY: I'm sure your relationship with these themes grows and evolves as you continue to work. How does that growth manifest itself in this exhibition?

DAULT: The through-thread is always, I think, just images—how do we see the maker? Which is why the show is called "Maker's Mark." Where is the artist's hand? What does it mean to simultaneously make and think? What is the mark? How do we see it? What does it mean to have paintings that you can see through right to the base? That access has always been of interest to me. In this show, I guess the new element is taking one of the tools that I would otherwise use on the surface of a canvas, and applying it directly to the wall.

Marianne Boesky's space has two exhibition rooms. In first one, the walls will be covered with this pattern I am making by using this tool on the wall directly. That same tool is used on a painting called *Hero Champ*, which is huge—it's 120 x 108 inches—and that painting will be in the second room. So there's this play, there are these transferences, happening in multiple places, from the pattern placing to the Formica, from the wall to the actual painting. Suddenly context, action, mark, all these things, they're all equally at play in this space.

O'LEARY: Specific to the paintings, you've said before that their pop culture titles can help ground something that is abstract. Can you talk a little bit about that?

DAULT: I'm not in any way suggesting that I don't think my paintings are important, but some abstract paintings are always sort of overly wrought, really poetic, or really philosophical. Yes, it's valuable to have spiritual awakenings while making an abstract painting, a lot of my inspiration comes from my past in my formative years, but a lot of it comes from pop culture—these everyday influences that I don't think deserve to be left behind just because there's still this divide between high and low. A blue painting is called *Chasing Waterfalls*, indeed it looks waterfall-like, and it used to be a TLC song. There's this way where many of the titles have double meanings. If you don't understand that it is this allusion to a song from the '90s, it doesn't mean that you're left out of the conversation. But if you do get it, it's just an added bonus. The titles can be pop cultural or really funny signs I see in deep Brooklyn when I'm driving. Some of it just comes from these everyday experiences that no one will get the double meaning of, but they have misspellings and they're just really funny and I appreciate plays with language. It's a fun way to bring in another element to the exploration of the surface. I appreciate when some abstract paintings are untitled, but I could never do that. I just think it's a missed opportunity.

O'LEARY: Do you come up with the titles before or after you finish the paintings?

DAULT: When I travel around I keep a running list of crazy things I see, and I always take photos. Have you seen Gerhard *Richter's Atlas*? It's this really great book of photographs he collected and categorized over the years. So I have this ongoing collection of these really funny photos I find in various cities in the world. I have that, and I always title after I'm finished painting.

O'LEARY: You have this background studying art history and writing as an art critic before you became an active artist. Do you think that trajectory was necessary? Does it continue to inform your art in an important way?

DAULT: I got into art school when I was 18 and I had this moment when I had to decide between McGill University in Montreal to do art history, or art school. It was a free ride, it was a full paid scholarship to art

school, but I turned it down because I thought, "I just don't know enough." I couldn't see putting stuff into the world without learning more about it first. So it was a 10-year winding path to do what I actually wanted to do, knowing the whole time that I wanted to be an artist. I thought, "Okay, I don't know enough, so I'll go learn the history of it," and then I thought, "Okay great, I graduated with my degree. How do we talk about it now?" So I wrote for a newspaper in Canada, which was really interesting because you can't use art jargon. I mean, it's explaining contemporary art to a general audience and that exercise was key in distilling the language of description. How do you confront an object not knowing contemporary discourses or contemporary art theories? Actually, that experience of writing about art got me interested in this notion of something being self-evident. I saw, show after show after show, artworks that relied entirely on a press release to explain them. While I understand that works for some artists, it made me question what it would mean to have an object or a painting that contained all—or most—of the information required to understand it. It was pivotal in helping me refine my own aesthetic and my own artistic position. While I was writing—I like to say I came out of the closet—I was secretly making artwork. And then I just thought, "This is a recipe for disaster if I stick to writing and not fully acknowledge what I've always wanted to do." I think that makes for bad criticism—the critic who always wanted to be an artist but never went for it—so that's when I went for it. I thought, "Okay, I'm ready."

"MAKER'S MARK" IS ON VIEW AT MARIANNE BOESKY IN NEW YORK THROUGH MARCH 21.