

art ltd.

Jessica Stockholder

by Caroline Picard

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Color Jam, 2012, Installation view at Adams and State Street, Photo: courtesy Chicago Loop Alliance

One would never suspect that Jessica Stockholder's ivy-covered studio was originally a barn. The one-story building on the edge of the University of Chicago's predominantly Gothic-style campus has high ceilings inside, skylights, windows and clean white walls. While it may be a far cry from those iconic red structures peppered across the Midwest, it is perfectly suited for artistic production. Given Stockholder's ongoing dialogue with architecture--her ability to intervene and transform architectural sites into multicolored environments, it seems fitting that this unique, well-nested spot would house her creativity. The site was originally converted to a studio in 1906 by Lorado Taft, a sculptor and professor who remains the building's namesake. In 1965 it was designated a National Landmark and, until recently, was a main hub of the University's MFA program, where Stockholder now teaches.

"I've been here for two years and I am beginning to feel settled. I like Chicago. It was hard to move; I felt like I was a plant uprooted." Since her New York debut in the late '80s, she has influenced a generation of artists with her site-specific installations. She has made a vibrant career "drawing in space" around the world. From the Whitney Museum of American Art to the Palacio de Cristal, from the Centre Pompidou to Art Basel, Stockholder appropriates a wide range of every day materials--like desk lamps, freezers, or bathtub bottoms--arranging them in space as one composing on a canvas. She's also enjoyed an academic career. For over a decade, until 2011, Stockholder worked as the Director and Professor of Graduate Studies in the Sculpture Department at Yale. Thereafter, she accepted a position at the University of Chicago as the Chair of the Visual Arts Department. In every aspect of her work, Stockholder responds to structure, whether considering a traditional, square canvas, the boundaries of an exhibition space, an intersection of a city, or even the administrative structure of a school.

Stockholder originated from the West Coast. Born in Seattle in 1959, she was raised in Vancouver and worked closely alongside Mowry Baden at the University of Victoria. With a BFA degree in hand, she left the mountainous landscape of British Columbia for graduate school. Although Stockholder had already begun composing sculptural interventions that addressed the space between and outside of painting, she applied and was accepted into Yale's painting department. "I applied to the painting department because I thought of myself as a painter," she says. After one year, and partly due to administrative practicalities, she switched over to the sculpture department, where she would later graduate.

Yale contrasted greatly from the University of Victoria. "At Yale I met artists, like Judy Pfaff and Mel Bochner, whom I had heard about at U Vic. It was like, 'Oh, these are real people.'" Artists she'd read about in magazines walked around campus. "I got there in the early '80s, when David Salle was getting a lot of attention," she says. The art market was booming, especially for painters. "[Yale] is really close to New York. But it isn't in New York. It provides a certain enclave of its own--though life there intersects what goes on in NY."

Perhaps in response to the highly commercial market that coincided with her graduate education, perhaps in response to the panoramic landscapes she had left behind, Stockholder began making large ephemeral installations in space; sprung free of the flat picture plane, they resisted easy commodification while employing materials endemic to custom. "You buy toothpaste and it comes in a plastic tube. You go shopping and what are you carrying your groceries in? All the things we do bring us into contact with objects we don't really need." She met immediate success. Soon after graduating with an MFA in 1985, Stockholder was a PS1 scholar from 1988-1989, during which time she received an NEA grant for sculpture, and a New York Foundation for the Arts grant in painting--once again proving her ability to expertly incorporate multiple disciplines in multiple scales.

The list of accomplishments that follows is long, rich and ongoing. She became a Guggenheim fellow in 1996, and participated in the 47th Venice Biennial. In 1999 she returned to Yale as a professor and chair of the sculpture department, where, for the next 12 years, she simultaneously fulfilled multiple international commissions. Some more recent examples include a large, 2009 city commission in New York's Madison Square Park, *Flooded Chambers Maid*--a piece that now resides permanently at the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis. In 2010, she transformed the Reina Sofia's Palacio de Cristal, installing an impressive tower of plastics as the centerpiece for *Peer out to See*. This past June, she participated in Art Basel with *Wide Eyes Smear Here Dear*--another work comprised of evocative materials including among other things, a swing set, a fake rock, and a "blob of red acrylic paint."

As head of the sculpture department, it might seem--on paper--that Stockholder had proclaimed a disciplinary alliance at last. Instead, she notes the ways in which sculpture has opened up over the last decade, so much so that the word itself desires revision. "Sculpture has become a less useful word than it used to be. What's sculpture? Who do you know carving stone and putting it on a pedestal? I mean, what's the definition of sculpture?" Consequently she engaged a broad range of multi-disciplinary student practices. "The students I worked with at Yale in the 'Sculpture' Department were making all kinds of things.' Ultimately that experience made for an easy transition into University of Chicago's unspecialized MFA program.

"I'd been at Yale in New Haven for 12 years; I was looking out my window and thinking--well, I could stay here the rest of my life, or not. When the University of Chicago invited me to come teach here it was compelling. I'm glad I moved." Although the University of Chicago's MFA program is about the same size as the sculpture department Stockholder had been overseeing previously, the programs are very different. "Here, we are too small a department to be divided into disciplines--that makes the conversation and critique we have in relation to the work different--not better or worse." Whereas the Yale School of Art is adjunct to Yale College, the MFA department Stockholder now chairs is embedded in the University's humanities division. Obviously, different departmental boundaries have an impact. "The structures we operate in, teach in or work in, affect what we do and how we think."

The same year she moved to Chicago, Stockholder worked with the Chicago Loop Alliance to wrap 76,000 square feet of colored vinyl around buildings and streets at the downtown intersection of State and Adams. *Color Jam* remains one of the largest Chicago public art commission to date. "Living here, with *Color Jam* on view gave rise to some feelings of exposure--day to day--but it was also really lovely," Stockholder admits. In this case, she did not install sculptural elements. Instead she worked with an industrial sign painting company and applied a variety of colorful paints to a single, high traffic commercial nucleus, transforming it into an immersive field of color. Swatches of rust orange, lime green and teal blue passed through the crosswalk, extending up the sides of buildings. They incorporated diagonal lines that challenged the city's perpendicular grid.

"The piece engaged four different buildings, owned and occupied by different people," Stockholder says. "It was also on the street and the sidewalk each governed by different city codes." Each element had a different set of codes that Stockholder had to negotiate--she had to allow business signage to be visible, for instance, from where it might hang against a building, just as it was necessary to use a particular kind of red on the street, in accordance with the city. Stockholder navigated a different set of regulations prescribed by each site. "The Chicago Loop Alliance is a civic organization, funded by the people who work and own buildings in the loop," she explains. "Because the CLA was so well connected to all levels of government they were able to make the work happen."

The intersection at Adams and State became an abstract painting. Its various, permanent, architectural features--newspaper dispensers, streetlights, gum spots, and even buildings--functioned like the objects Stockholder usually installs in museum galleries. Pedestrians, taxicabs, and buses also made their way into this colorful sphere, becoming--temporarily--sculptural elements. Except from a high floor of a skyscraper, the entire tableau was impossible to see at once. "[The birds eye view] was very different than being on the ground." Being on the street, one was immersed in a colorful environment uncharacteristic of a big city intersection. When asked if it was difficult to conceive of such a large scale she laughs, "It was much easier to think, OK let's put some colors over these buildings than it was to actually put the color on the buildings!"



Lift, Installation view, July 10 - August 31, 2013 at 1301PE, Los Angeles, Photo: courtesy 1301PE, Los Angeles

Even in her more intimate works, the same principles apply. "All systems of communication are abstract. The direct experience of things is direct experience." Her current show "LIFT," at 1301PE Gallery in Los Angeles, seems a good example of this. It regularly incorporates physical ladders, or lifts, and then composes abstract forms, or angled lines off of walls or on paper that mimic ladders. The courtyard holds a massive *God's Eye*--one of those yarn and Popsicle stick structures often composed at summer camp. The piece is elevated dramatically through a large scissor lift. The mechanical crosshatch of the blue and gray lift resonates with the yarn's wrapping, behind which a small green tree makes an almost accidental appearance at its post beside the front door. A thick blue diagonal stripe stretches up on the building's façade, and continues, behind the *God's Eye*, up to the roofline. Horizontal second-story windows frame a long, pink stripe, intersecting the blue line. Shadows cast by the second story's overhang add another dimension, as does the grid pattern on the courtyard floor and the adjacent, angled awning.

Work inside 1301PE responds to that outdoor fixture. The first floor contains one small, single work, *Related*, composed of fur, plastic, wood fiber blocks, granite and acrylic paint. In a room on the second floor, two drawings hang in frames. *Zee*, an adjacent sculpture with a green light bulb, stands kitty-corner to the drawings; its diagonal boards of wood echo the rise and run of ladders, as bright green cords loop like pencil marks on the floor. The last room contains three discrete ladder sculptures. Here, the viewer looks out onto the courtyard through the back of the *God's Eye*. Stockholder's ladders have been modified in different ways. All of them reach up to the wall in some way; they draw the eye up, as the scissor lift elevates the *God's Eye*.

Each iteration of a particular motif facilitates a direct experience. Just as, one might argue, adding large patches of unusual color to an intersection, would remind pedestrians about the abstract physical space they are so accustomed to. "We have categories of abstract art that are distinct from representational art, but you don't have to push very hard to find that the categories collapse a little." She sits at her studio table with a mug of green tea clasped between her hands. It is not as hot as one might expect for a July day, and open windows welcome a cross draft. "There are really great paintings of oranges and not-so-great paintings of oranges--the formal, abstract qualities of a work intersecting how the oranges are represented has everything to do with whether or not the painting is good. It's not possible to make meaningful things without engaging abstraction."

Perhaps that's why Stockholder does not center on one specific discipline, or one set of materials. "At some juncture, I could work with anything. If you gave me five things to work and that's all I had--well, I can work with anything," she smiles. "On the other hand, the particular qualities of the materials I choose have everything to do with what the work means and how it functions." Her material concerns are bound to the objects that interact with everyday life. Stockholder manages to draw those vernacular things out of their conventional contexts, and in so doing highlight both the formal traits they possess and the networks they were produced by. "I work with material that's around, and in the process I notice and take stock of what our material landscape is; a lot of inexpensive plastic things happen to be part of it." And yet, for all their artifice, she does not see those manufactured materials as necessarily being distinct from a separate natural environment, or from humanity. "We and all materials, are natural!" she exclaims. "That we love to make things--plastics, electricity, and oil included--is part of our nature."