

Q&A

"There Are No Words for What I'm Going to Do": An Interview with Jessica Stockholder

By Artspace Editors

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Jessica Stockholder, Chicago, 2017. Image via Phaidon.

Seattle-born, Chicago-based Jessica Stockholder is one of a generation of artists who have broken down the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture to create a new perceptual space. Found objects ranging from oranges to neon tubes, discarded household fabrics, and decontextualized building materials are massed and lyrically intertwined with profusions of vivid color. Her architectonic installations engulf the viewer, recalling Kurt Schwitters; Dadaist collages, spliced with the formal concerns of 1950s abstract painting and redefined through a postmodern sensibility. Her work explores the body in social and cultural space to generate a complex formal and conceptual experience.

Here, excerpted from Phaidon's newest monograph, is a conversation between Lynne Tillman and the artist while they flip through older works in the artist's studio.

I started painting on un-stretched canvas.

Did you paint when you were a kid?

Yes. I remember getting into a mood where I just wanted to make something. It was a frustrating experience. I felt that I lacked facility, that I was inept.

How did you know what to measure against?

My mother painted. For a while. I painted next to her. I remember making one painting that was a sort of stage with figures on it. It was an orange and black painting.

You still make stages—platforms, ramps.

In a journal I have from when I was a kid, I have a dream written down about yellow newspaper. I've used a lot of yellow newspaper in my work. This is un-stretched canvas. There are different pieces of cloth stuck together, painted, then there are bits of acrylic paint—this was in 1980.

Do you have a name for it?

I didn't title pieces until much later... These are made with pieces of cloth and stuff tuck together.

Did you go to art school?

No, I went to university. Earlier I studied with Mowry Baden, who's a sculptor. This is a very early one—a watercolor of me.

Looks more like a wolf man or a farmer—

Overalls were in style then. Here's one I like very much.

That's beautiful. Like a Matisse.

He's one of my favorite painters... These are all close to square or rectangular painting.

Was this while you were studying with Baden?

Yes. He's a friend of my father's. When I was 14, I had private lessons. He taught me to draw—line drawings of objects that became quite abstract. He taught me to appreciate the surprise of making something unexpected. He would talk about the drawing in terms of how it addressed the page. It wasn't about representing the thing that was on the table.

Most artists, writers too, recapitulate a number of different styles. It's about working with a language. You have to figure out what's already there, then see what you can do with it.

Here's my Larry Poons. And this is one of the first paintings where I started to break up the pieces, so that there'd be space between the things on the wall.

How did that come to you: to begin using cloth and...

Mowry spoke about the un-stretched pieces not having integrity as objects.

Why was that?

The cloth hanging on the wall was flimsy. He talked about the easel painting as a small replica of the wall it hangs on. He pointed to architecture giving meaning to the historical structure of painting. This way of thinking made a lot of sense to me. I later found similar ideas discussed by Brian O'Doherty in *The White Cube*. Though his view of painting's history is more cynical. An un-stretched canvas hanging on the wall doesn't provide a place to take off from the material and forget it's there.

Is it a neither here nor there state?

For me painting is wonderful because it provides a place to forget the material, even while your attention is drawn to it.

How do you mean?—forget the material—

I use material as a place to make fiction, fantasy, and illusion. When this happens, attention is drawn to something abstract and separate from the material—the physical paint and canvas.

Do you use a material in order to forget it?

I like there to be places where the materials is forgotten; but I also love to force a meeting of abstraction with material or stuff. Color is very good at this, always very ready to assert itself as independent of material.

Particularly when its use is idiosyncratic. In *Recording Forever Pickled* (1990), in front of a kind of skeletal wall, a wooden structure, there's a wrapped armchair. What seems a coffee table is in front of the chair, but it's made of concrete. I think about the impossible living room. The space one can't talk in. The spaces or things one can't talk about. I think that piece is, again, a kind of stage, with an element of the absurd in it. And the yellow on the floor could be any other color. One's attention is called to the yellow just as a color. It's bright, challenging, odd.

It couldn't be another color, because the colors are keyed to each other. There's plywood holding the crosses or Xs up. The back is painted violet and this violet reflects onto the wall. Then the red—

The wall seems to disappear. I can't tell if there's space behind.

I often use white to do that, because visually white sinks back into the wall of the gallery. Then the viewer moves around to the ends of this piece, the reflected purple or violet between the wall I made and the wall of the gallery is seen as a volume of color. The violet compliments the yellow-orange on the floor. The colors are keyed to carry the eye around; they read across space. In this way the color is very specific.

You could have set up a different set of color combinations. But you call attention to color by what seems to be an arbitrariness in the decision, since it's not linked to a 'natural' concern.

That's right. The color is not descriptive of something else in the world.

It has its own like as a color. You use it idiosyncratically, calling attention to it, which is painterly...

I weave the fiction that the color makes together with what the objects are and suggest, along with a structure and I make.

You moved from painting on paper, to un-stretched canvas, then to bits of cloth, things stuck on cloth, to something that beings to fill a whole space.

I can show and tell you how that happened. In this work, I found painted boards and stuck them to the wall. The little pink wiry thing comes out from the wall onto the floor, and a piece on the edge goes up through the ceiling. So, though this piece is still very rectangular and framed by the wall, it pokes out a little bit, up through the ceiling and onto the floor.

When was this?

1980.

When you became more interested in the space between things, objects started coming off the wall. You became interested in the space between two objects—and the wall itself. Did you feel that you were involved in a critique of painting and a critique of the institution of the gallery?

I don't think I work from a space of critique. My work isn't, in the end, a critique of anything. It's more of an exploration. I work against the kind of polarization that's implied by the word critique. I could critique the institution, and I certainly have feelings of criticism about institutions, but's undeniable that my work depends on the institution that is art. That's a contradiction that everybody lives with—whatever system one's in. The scientific, academic, or literary community. You work within it.

I have always felt uncomfortable in museums and galleries. There's a kind of a deadening in those places that I work in response to. I try to bring the work closer instead of having it all framed off and moved from me. Even so, I love what the art institution makes possible; there's a kind of intensity and it's a place where you can express

anything, and explore anything without hurting your neighbors. Art is elevated—presented as special. This makes it possible to pay close attention to very wonderful mundane things.

Without that distinction, between art and something else—

It just runs into brushing your teeth.

Warhol confounded that, problematized it. If you make a picture of a soup can, you will think about what's outside the frame of that picture, and maybe you will think differently about that ordinary can. Representing it takes it out of the realm of the so-called ordinary.

I try to bring some of that specialness, or heightened quality, from art-making to the ordinary. This work was outside of the University of Victoria. The little pieces of wood are painted and hinged. There's a figurative element too. This piece never was finished; it was just arranged. I was thinking about the color being thrown around, an idea I'm still interested in. The planes of wood were throwing color back and forth or reading across to each other. The colors bridge the space at a speed that's much quicker than walking. So the interaction of the color starts to feel abstract, as though it's not material. And me moving, I'm another kind of material.

The way you think about art relates to science, geometry, physics. Speed, light, volume. As a viewer, I'll use my frames of reference. The concrete wall has an object jutting out. It raises—projects—certain questions. My eye might be moving, because of the color play, but I don't think I would be thinking that. There are different moments in it. It's arresting in terms of your process.

I begin in a very physical place, without a lot of words. When you were speaking about the color in *Recording Forever Pickled*—how it doesn't refer to anything, that it is its own matter-of-fact thing. I thought, there's a kind of muteness in that. When I'm asked what my plans are for the future I look inside and find a mute feeling. There's a quiet—there are no words for what I'm going to do.

In *Recording Forever Pickled*, what would a conversation be in an impossible living room? The spaces are what one can't talk about. Using the yellow you might also be signifying something that can't be spoken about.

It's interesting to consider that as a meaning of yellow. Manipulating material is a way to speak.

How did you move into installation?

Installation is a very poorly defined word. The earlier work started to elbow the space of the wall. It doesn't seem like such a huge jump to dealing with the space of the room. In 1982 Barbara Fisher invited me to put drawings in a show at Open Space Gallery in Victoria. I didn't want to put drawings in the show.

And then she said: You can have this space to anything you want?

Yes. This was the first time I consciously addressed the space rather than just the wall. I've kept doing it. It certainly doesn't make life easy! And installation has become so prevalent a part of art-making. People don't buy it for their homes, to be cute about it. You set up a challenge for yourself. There's not much of an art market in Canada. As an art student I wasn't thinking about selling work, and I had no place to store it, so I didn't think about keeping it.

It's almost impossible for me to imagine—not keeping one's work.

I keep the slides. The process is what matters to me—making the work, how one work leads to another, and how showing the work and having people look at it and talk about it feeds it.

That fits in with some of the art movements of the 1960s and 1980s which were responding to the object-orientated nature of art.

It was in the air. Mowry was very much involved with thinking about how art objects function politically within an economy; this was all part of the discussion around me.

A curator says: Here are these walls. Instead you want to use the whole space to do something that fills that space or speaks about space. Takes it up or shows some sort of relationship to it. That's intriguing not only formally, but also psychologically.

It's an attempt to make things immediate.

I don't know that writing functions in that immediate way. Maybe it does. But the process of reception—

The way I read is probably more immediate than you would like!

Maybe the way I perceived art is less immediate than you would like. I don't think about tactility, a word that crops up about your work. Some artists want to sense that this could be something you'd want to touch. In some way I guess I don't feel myself in the world physically. Although you push that. In the piece with a ramp, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1985), I understand it as something that goes nowhere.

How do you see that?

Usually a ramp leads somewhere. Again you take something that has a function and use it in a way that calls attention to it as other than its function—ramps take you from one place to another. Now, it does take me from one part of your art work to another. But it's in such an absurd way that it speaks to me of a certain futility—about going anywhere. I'm a pessimist, but it did confront me, make a physical impression on me. I don't know if that means 'tactility.' I think of it as this object in the room—

—calling attention to itself as a thing, yes. That's what I like to do.

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