

rachel uffner

ARTFORUM

Sara Greenberger Rafferty discusses "Bananas" at The Kitchen

As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

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The New York–based artist Sara Greenberger Rafferty has exhibited widely since 2001. Her latest exhibition, “Bananas”—exploring humor, performance, and everyday life—is on view January 9–March 7 at the Kitchen.

I’VE ALWAYS THOUGHT of my work in the context of performance, so I was thrilled when the Kitchen, a long-standing nonprofit performance venue, proposed this exhibition. Even though I don’t make “performance art” as such, my work engages with that medium via more static forms. The exhibition space at the Kitchen is quite large, which has forced me to consider scale in this show more than in other contexts. There are several small pieces and other works that have parts that fit into a larger whole. Rather than an “installation,” it is a show of discrete objects and images. As opposed to a novel, I thought of the show as a collection of short stories.

The imagery refers to cooking, women, and stand-up comedy—subjects I’ve been working with for a while. But the works were primarily born out of simple color studies. I had previously made a lot of monochrome works based on black-and-white photography from the 1950s and ’60s, and I wanted to reincorporate color. But I had pared down the color vocabulary in my work so much that the process

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

felt a little like coping with a broken leg. In trying to teach myself how to walk again, I began to do color studies and look at Josef Albers's pedagogy. I read historical and contemporary texts on color theory and examined a few New Age texts on color therapy. I wanted to try to use colors conceptually to explore cultural connotations and associations.

For instance, with the color yellow, I began to incorporate the theme of the egg. It seemed very related to motifs and objects I had previously used in my work, such as cream pies and other foods that could be thrown at someone's face. And of course, it's gendered as female. In this show, there are a series of silk-screen prints that were made with egg whites; they are like bootleg albumen prints. For these, I worked with Forth Estate Editions, an enterprise that publishes prints by mostly young artists. Like other works I've made, these are prints of drawings based on photographs, but they are silk-screened with egg whites over the top, which forms a latent or invisible image.

In addition to bringing color back into my work, I have been trying to make the work actually funny rather than simply about funny. Previously, I was invested in tropes of comedy and imagery involving jokes, but now I'm interested in works themselves operating more as comedians. Something seemed a little off with making work about comedy while never garnering any laughs. Typically, my work tends to be on the scale of just one person. I'm not interested in being a master of something; I want my work to look physically underwhelming. That's basically the idea of the stand-up comic anyway—it's not a Broadway production but a single person on a stage. It's just one body in front of a microphone with a stool and a glass of water. I like the idea of that solitary presence that functions like an artwork, with its back against the wall. As I was making the work over the past year, there were ups and downs in the world as well as in my own life, so in the end there are some funny works and there are some melancholy pieces; but these are, after all, just two sides of the same depreciated coin.