

rachel uffner

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Sara Greenberger Rafferty creates fissures and tears in the realms of photography and sculpture.



Sara Greenberger Rafferty, *Madeleine*, C-print, 24×20 inches, Edition of 5, 2009. All images courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York.

After stumbling upon Sara Greenberger Rafferty's work at the New York Photo Festival this spring, I became curious about her varied approaches towards making art. One of the reasons her work is so interesting to me is that she prefers not to be boxed into a corner by material, method, or medium-specificity. Punching, waterlogging, cutting, and rephotographing are some of the techniques she uses to re-appropriate photographs of performers, comedians, and television personalities, into strong art objects. These objects include *Double Issue*, her 2010 artist book modeled after a TV Guide, and a video tableaux she is working on with Triple Canopy. She understands how the

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interplay between pieces can create a dialogue between the viewer and the works themselves and how a heteronomic exhibition title can further the analysis of the work. In addition to her studio work, Rafferty works towards providing a realistic representation of what it is to be a working artist in a contemporary world.

ASHLEY MCNELIS Your degrees are in sculpture and photo, correct?

SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY Yes. I liked that as my interests were in sculpture and new genres. It's very à la mode right now to be medium-specific. I'm not one of those artists that doesn't believe in material specificity. It's very important to me but I don't feel that I fit into any one dialogue. I've more often than not been contextualized with photo recently, but I don't want to choose. I make artworks.

AM I wouldn't put your work into one category.

SGR Most of my friends are either photographers or painters and sculptors and are really committed to medium specificity. I don't feel that way. Perhaps we need a new metric: Jeff Koons makes extra large things and Tom Sachs makes extra extra large things . . . I guess I could almost say I'm an artist that makes small- to medium-sized things.

AM There you go. (*laughter*)

SGR That's not how I always think about it either. But I like to think about making, if not extra large, but large things that are made up of a bunch of small things. I hope that's not too abstract.

AM No, it isn't. I think that not labeling yourself enables you to keep evolving in your work. I'm curious—you have all these methods of changing the image: blurring, defacing, punching . . . When does something feel right to you within your process?

SGR That's a good question. I don't consider myself a process artist. And my motivation is more of a move or gesture than an attempt to change an image. In a way that goes back to the object or material specificity. I started making sculptures that were performing a very small violence or [engaging with the act of] defacing in a humorous way. Not legitimate violence. But it was a little gesture of violence that also had the potential to be funny. And so from that I started to do the punches. And originally for the punches I was making drawings that were based on photos. I started framing up the drawings with the punches in them. It was about putting all these hours into making a drawing and then just ruining it and then displaying that as the finished object. But they just felt pathetic and lacked strength as objects. It's not funny when a person is really weak, but I think you can still talk about that weakness or that little violence. With those drawings I started to put them on my copy stand and photograph them and decided that the pure photograph of something that was damaged made the work complete. I knew that the object was a better object even though it was about this damage.

With the waterlogged pictures it was part wanting to have less control over the gesture so that that energy would be felt in the work and it was part budgetary pragmatics. I didn't have the money for the equipment that I needed to make larger pictures in the studio and the best thing I had in terms of increasing the scale was my scanner. It was in '08 and '09 when people were first really feeling the crash. Also, there was something appealing to me in that, as a working artist, all the work essentially could be made while at an office job. It was a kind of performance. My tools were the scanner, office quality paper, a shitty inkjet printer . . .



Katherine, C-print, 24×20 inches, Edition of 5, 2009.

AM Things available at hand.

SGR A lot of my work has come from pragmatic concerns mixed with conceptual concerns.

AM I was looking at some of the portraits from—is it the *Tears*, like crying, series or is it the *Tears*, like ripping fabric, series?

SGR It's either. It's a . . . damn. I can't remember the word. *Heteronym*. That's it.

AM Two words with the same spelling meaning different things. They're both applicable.

SGR Exactly. For most of my shows I've had one word titles that are double meaning. My first solo show, my undergrad thesis show, was called *Class*. And it was a play on social class and classroom. So it's something that I've always been doing. But at the same time I don't make rules that I'm not allowed to break. I

just don't believe in that.

AM I have a question about rules for you a little later. I was looking at the Madeline Kahn portrait, *Madeline* (2009) in the *Tears* series. Despite the blurring and the waterlogging you still know it's her in the original picture because of her eyes. I think of her as a strong woman, and the viewer can still see that in the photograph. I was wondering if you were thinking about personality and being while you were doing this?

SGR Most of those pictures from that group were of women comedians; they were cast because of who they were historically. The show was about a lot of things but pretty much every single picture with a few pointed exceptions is a direct address picture where the person is looking directly at you. The way that I cast and cropped the original appropriated pictures was all very controlled and directed for this effect. It was very important to me to choose women who were either leading or sidekick-type comics. There were only a couple men in that show, like Bill Cosby. And that was a little bit strange because that was Bill Cosby from this E. F. Hutton ad. You may or may not remember it.

AM No.

SGR E. F. Hutton was an investment bank à la Lehman Brothers. And Bill Cosby was their TV spokesperson in the '80s and '70s with the slogan, "When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen." They were one of the biggest investment banks and they went under in '87 due to the stock market crash. Later, Lehmann Brothers bought them. Ha! I just read somewhere that the grandson of E. F. Hutton is reviving the company as of this year. So it's really hopeless. Anyway, that show was the September when people started really feeling our recent crash. That was my one topical piece.

AM That's very timely.

SGR Direct address was really important so I think that *Madeline* was a crucial example of that because she has one eye really clearly looking at you. The way the works were installed in the show was echoing off the others. The last picture, *Katherine* was one of Katherine Helmond looking back towards all the other people in the photographs; I was using a certain order to confront the viewer and interplay among the portraits. But I should add, in reference to your original question, that in more recent work I really don't care about the subject of the photo. Celebrity, or the faces being recognizable, these things are not important to me.

AM That's cool. Very good answer to my question. (*laughter*)

AM You mentioned that you don't make rules for yourself that you can't break, like how you said you could never create an original image of a person's face. But you eventually broke that rule. I was wondering what the reasoning behind that was.

SGR It came out of being a student.

AM And looking at Art History?

SGR Yes. Specifically the history of photography and the way that it's been an agent of subjection, of the state, of dominant culture . . . I didn't see a way around objectifying. How do you choose a person without also talking about body politics? It's okay for me in my own logic to use these extant images because people are already completely consenting to being in the public realm. I wouldn't just use regular people or civilians.

Technically the only way that I've broken my rule—I've photographed myself in a couple of stills and pretty much every video I've ever made. Specifically, I had been working for a while with images of comedians. So it was a natural progression from that sense. Just investigating the body of the comedian is

interesting because it's a total gendered male body.

AM Absolutely. You mentioned that you were more comfortable using comedians and performers from the past instead of contemporary ones because they didn't have connotations and attachments that the public could so readily think of in reference to them.

SGR I actually broke that rule. In my last show *Remote* I mixed in pictures of contemporary people. As it turns out, I'm completely uninterested in talking about nostalgia. If I were a spectator seeing my work, I would probably ask why there is so much from the '70s and '80s. That's so aesthetically automatic to us. It's an easy out in terms of aesthetics. I have those questions about my own work, myself. I'm very suspicious of my use of people from the past. What you are referring to from the other interview is just a way of explaining to myself *why*. I have an easier time processing that imagery.



Sara Greenberger Rafferty, *Bill*, C-print, 24x20 inches, Edition of 5, 2009.

AM I read a passage online in which you talked about the everyday and how people expect others to act versus little acts of noncompliance and how that played into your work.

SGR Even though I'm totally dedicated to making objects for better or for

worse, performance is the most important aspect. I think the thing that's important to me about the life or body of an artist in society is one of the reasons why my day job is teaching college. First of all, I think that it is for me part of what my art practice is. Second, modeling an artist in front of people from within and being this rogue ambassador for what artists are that people aren't seeing on TV is the best thing. Perhaps in the end that's my justification. I'm not completely counter-culture, I live on the grid. I participate in things —mortgages and taxes and marriage. I'm married. But I feel I represent an alternative, adding a little protest to mainstream culture from within. But I think maybe what I was originally referring to is that we all perform our personas. At the end of the day you're just with yourself, with your thoughts. And that's difficult to transmit to the world. You're always compromised. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, it's just a condition of being human. I've been teaching for six years full-time, not a super long time. But, I'm still in class on the first day and the whole class mills about until they realize that I'm the teacher.

AM (*laughter*)

SGR If it used to be bothersome, now I realize that it blows their minds a little bit that someone who they thought was gonna be their homey is gonna be the teacher. It changes the dynamics. Teaching is a really intense high-wire performance. You have to be an authority and I'm totally against being an authority. So you ultimately have to have students that are sophisticated enough to know that by not being into being an authority, you're also somehow a role model. That's so hard. And sometimes being good isn't what makes you a good artist or a good art teacher. To quote Steely Dan: "It's pretzel logic."

AM (*laughter*) Thank you for quoting Steely Dan.

SGR Oh, sure. (*laughter*)

AM How, if at all, has teaching changed your work?

SGR Well, I can't say that it doesn't. I often present work of artists that I'm not into. I don't necessarily dig myself, even. Again, it's part of that not being an authority. Some student may be totally valid in what they're interested in and I can't be editorial about it. Or a student that loves this or that . . . we all talk shit. I just don't wanna be negative about other artists in the classroom. So maybe I should just aim to not rag on other artists at all. But I definitely don't want to model that to students because my favorite part about being an artist is the community, even though it's competitive and racked with jealousy. That's so uninteresting to me. I wanna model the idea that we're all supporting each other. And in a way we are.

Also when I'm working with the best students, it's really keeping my mind activated and also engaged in helping other people solve their problems which I think helps me be a better problem solver in my own studio practice. It sends me into dialogue with a lot of things. You stay on top of a lot of stuff because you don't want to be that geezer . . .

AM Who just has tenure and coasts.

SGR Exactly. You really don't, and that's so not what I want to do. I mean, at the same time, it's inevitable. To quote Matthew McConaughey's character in *Dazed and Confused*: "I get older and they stay the same age."

AM (*laughter*)

SGR And that's really true. It's a mind-fuck. Maybe I'll teach until I'm in my fifties and then retire so that I'm never a true elder statesman. But maybe I'll be the best in my fifties. But I definitely what I want my future decades to be the best work of my life. And it's difficult the way that the New York art world eats you up. If you get known for something they make it really hard to evolve. People really want you to do what you were doing when you first met them. It's

stultifying and avoiding it takes strategy beyond just making work in your studio, unfortunately.

AM I think it sounds as though you're doing well to try to avoid that.

SGR I'm trying. I also believe that teaching is part of it, but it's also good that I don't have to rely on the market which is bullshit anyways. But at the same time I think of how much farther my work could be if I had all those extra hours. With limited hours you're going at a different pace but it also takes reflection, so I'm hoping it evens out. These are some new ideas that I'm working through over here on the wall. Nothing is a real work yet. They're more just sketches. I'm playing with the idea of pattern. It's not really ready for primetime. But I think I'm moving on to whatever is next.

Ashley McNelis is an art historian who specializes in photography. In addition to doing interviews for the BOMBlog, she also contributes book reviews. She was born in Pittsburgh and now lives in Brooklyn.

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