

The Brooklyn Rail

McGlynn, Tom: Interview

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Art | In Conversation

SARAH CROWNER with Tom McGlynn

“I saw it as an experiment, you know, I just wanted to see what would happen.”



Portrait of Sarah Crowner, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Sarah Crowner's large-scale paintings are carefully structured and absolutely mesmerizing. She has shown them in galleries, but has also used her technical capabilities to create paintings that function as backdrops for stage performances. On the occasion of Crowner's third solo show at Casey Kaplan gallery, the artist spoke with *Rail* Editor-at-Large, Tom McGlynn. Their discussion touches on the concept of "plastic memory," how time functions for paintings, the use of glazed tile, and how a painting is experienced differently when a performer activates the gallery. Their conversation was recorded on January 8 for the *Rail*'s *New Social Environment*; it has been edited for precision and expanded for comprehensiveness.

Tom McGlynn (Rail): I first became familiar with your work, Sarah, at an artist's talk with Sam Moyer, Julia Rommel, N. Dash, and Erin Shirreff on the occasion of the show *Painting/Object* held at the FLAG Art Foundation in 2018. I was intrigued by your concept and process of painting and so welcome the opportunity to get to know your work more in depth here. In our initial discussion, I was fascinated by the fact that you mentioned your development being shaped by what you called "art-adjacent" influences; not necessarily painting alone. Would you mind recapitulating that for us here? The thought is fascinating, because everybody comes at painting from a different angle, and there are aspects of your approach which expand on painting's traditional potential. These earlier influences might help illuminate those. Maybe we could start there and then focus on your current exhibition, which opened at Casey Kaplan on October 29, 2020, and runs through January 16, 2021.

Sarah Crowner: During the period after graduate school, I was having a hard time finding my voice and finding meaning within the realm of painting. I had a small studio in the city, and while working different day jobs tried to paint in the evenings. I struggled, unable to make sense of the medium of painting—maybe, looking back, I was impatient with the slowness of oil on canvas. Also, I was missing a kind of tactility. At some point I decided to put "oil on canvas" aside for the moment and try a new medium—I was thinking about clay. And then Hunter College offered me a ceramics residency sometime around 2006. At the same time, I was going to the main New York Public Library a lot. I was looking at their image library, reading, and also going to the MoMA library, and other art museum libraries around the city. I discovered these incredible old art magazines from the early 1910s and 1920s that I could literally put my hands on, I could photocopy, scan, and examine. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, maybe inspiration, maybe an answer to the endless problems of painting! It was in one of these libraries that I discovered *The Blind Man*, a short lived artist-published magazine produced in 1917, and published by Beatrice Wood, Marcel Duchamp, and Henri-Pierre Roché on the occasion of that year's Armory Show in New York. From this point I wanted to learn more

about Beatrice Wood, the artist, who was part of the Dada scene in New York in the 1910s and '20s. She eventually moved to a small town in California, the same town I grew up in as a child, Ojai. And what turned out to be interesting to me was not her artwork, but her story, her biography. And so I read her 1985 autobiography *I Shock Myself*, in which she discusses her friends and lovers, those who she knew throughout her life and who influenced her. The book was about relationships, influence, and inspiration. As an experiment, back in the ceramics studio, I used her medium, clay, and made several hollow unglazed anthropomorphic portraits of her friends and lovers. So one is Marcel Duchamp, another is Picabia. She was friends with Brâncuși. She was close with the composer Edgard Varèse. When she moved to California, she followed Krishnamurti, the Theosophist and educator. She was also close with the writer Anaïs Nin. And so here I was trying to recreate her life story through her medium, clay, in a medium that was new to me. These ghosts, so to speak, found their way into my work. The medium I used was clay, but the other meaning of the word *medium* is a way to speak with the past, or speak with spirits. This project got me thinking about how to get back into painting again, through this specific intersection of the handmade with art history. And to answer your question about the “art-adjacent”: I found out that sometimes the thing one does “on the side” can work its way back into the center.

Rail: There’s a wonderful technical term in ceramics that you mentioned in our initial discussion, and which became a title of one of your shows, *Plastic Memory*.

Crowner: Yes, and even now I do a lot of pottery on the wheel. When you lift up a still-wet, finished pot off of the wheel you might make a thumbprint on it. Even if you smooth it out, after you fire the pot, the fingerprint comes back even more pronounced. It's as if the material, the medium, has a memory, as much as you think you can smooth it out and try to make it perfect. There's always this print of the hand on it, which I love—plastic memory.

Rail: A great, almost poetic term, and that combination of the neurological and the phenomenological in something both made and perceived by hand. It's also related to human cognition, as in neuroplasticity: the brain's ability to change and adapt as a result of experience. And this of course is related to John Dewey’s concepts in *Art as Experience* (1934). That kind of recognition of a more expansive concept of art-making has also informed your later painting/installations.

Crowner: I was becoming really interested in the importance of the body—and the viewer's body—as it relates to my paintings. And thinking about the body in that sense, and thinking about movement across the space, it made me think about making a painting that you could walk on, stand on, dance on or run across and lie down on, something that's really activated and functional. Then I thought that ceramic tiles could be a form of abstract hard-edged painting (*The Wave*, 2014). These handmade glazed terracotta tiles are made at a friend's ceramics factory in Guadalajara, Mexico. They're all slightly different, they all have different glazes, with various irregularities in them. Each of them are cut by hand, so none of the edges are perfectly straight. And if you put them all together, suddenly you have a quasi-hard edge; you have color; you have gesture. In this case, I'm working with techniques of the architect, or the builder, or the tile-maker, while thinking of abstract painting all the time. In the same way that the paintings might make one think of the technique of a tailor or a quilter, and actually employ those techniques, this installation might make you think of building.



Installation view, Sarah Crowner, *The Wave*, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, 2014. Courtesy the artist, Casey Kaplan, New York and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.

Rail: Was this the same factory where Jorge Pardo produced some of his tile works? I'm asking since the first time I've seen tile deployed by an artist in such an environmental way was at Pardo's treatment of the former Dia bookstore space in Chelsea.

Crowner: He did work at the same factory, and yes, I remember that installation. Pardo seems more concerned with social spaces and interior design. And what I'm talking about is painting. In my tile floor installations there is usually a recessed edge, and the floor is raised six inches on a platform. You notice the edge, and it makes you think that it's movable, temporary and portable, in the same way that the paintings are portable. It points to the possibility of the whole installation collapsing and being transported somewhere else.

Rail: Right, it's more provisional, contingent, perhaps. I think the thing that it also raises in relation to Pardo, it's, you know, I'm not making a correlation, but this whole idea where minimal hard-edge abstraction would be considered decor, you know, there's, there's one historical critique of hard-edged abstraction as merely decor. Pardo seems to intentionally play with that critique. In comparison, your installation at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery seems more a refutation of that whole idea of the simply decorative.

Crowner: I was also really interested in not only just the visual aspects of painting, but the way that a painting could feel. I wanted to hear what the tiles sound like when people walk over them in their high heels. Also, the feeling of the glassy hardness of the tiles, their slippery coldness, and how they interact with the very soft, velvety, absorbent feeling of the paintings in the room.

Rail: Plastic memory again. For a subsequent painting-installation you chose a 1934 Sophie Taeuber-Arp painting *Échelonnement désaxé* as an inspiration. This related to your exhibition at Mass MoCA in 2016, I believe? The literal translation of the Taeuber-Arp is something like “offset scaling.” Yet I thought of how the incremental aspects of this work also relates to some of your compositional traits: the modular repetitions of your shape relationships.

Crowner: I think I was interested in one or two of those curves in particular, and it's a tiny painting by the way. I repeated those curves and rotated them 90 degrees, so that they look like stems. This painting is called *Rotated Stretched Stems, Cropped* (2016). And the blue shapes also look like drips, like paint dripping downward. But more importantly is the relationship of the painting to the floor as it was in the previous *Wave* installation. And I wanted to really think of the painting as a backdrop, and the tile floor as a stage. I collaborated with the sound and visual artist James Hoff and a dancer named Carolyn Schoerner to create a performance there [*Post Tree*, 2016]. I wanted to think about this painting as a literal backdrop. We organized a performance, about 25 minutes long. It was another kind of experiment for me, thinking more about painting over time and space—where there is this active form of a dancer in red, moving around the painting and dancing on this pattern of cement tiles. What do motion and music do to the painting? Do they animate the painting? Or does the stillness of the painting quiet the dancer? The possibilities of painting over time and space...



Carolyn Schoerner, *Post Tree* performance, presented in conjunction with Sarah Crowner, *Beetle in the Leaves*, MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: As I was preparing some of your images for our discussion the phrase came to me: “the time of shape,” or an inversion of the title of George Kubler’s 1962 book *The Shape of Time*, which became quite influential with artists in the ’60s.

Crowner: Could you explain what you mean?

Rail: Well, as you’ve said, you’re creating these situations. They’re environmental and so sculptural and in that sense time-based. And you’re putting your paintings in these situations that engage environments as opposed to their remaining reticent on the museum wall, as, you know, discrete artworks. So they too become environmental. And the environment lends time to the paintings. But there is also a timing to the shapes within each of your paintings, a morphological sequencing that animates them.

Crowner: I once made a backdrop that went to different museums, and different theatrical venues. I liked the idea that I could make a painting, roll it up and send it from site to site, and then unfurl it and a different activity happens in front of it, like a curtain or a backdrop. How does it change the meaning of the painting? And I like the idea of how a dancer’s quick movements in front of the painting/backdrop can actually slow down the reception of the work. Often we go to galleries, and we breeze through a gallery in five minutes, maybe, and we think we’ve seen the show, or we understand the work. Yet what happens if you’re sitting still for 45 minutes in a chair as in the time it might take for a dance performance. You can’t move away and escape so easily! And in such a performance there’s so much else going on—lighting, sound, etc.

Rail: Well, it seems to me like you're offering more angles to a concept of viewing paintings—painting in an expanded field—and in so doing you're offering more *conceptual time* to the perception of painting.

Crowner: Yes. In another instance I was invited to collaborate with a choreographer named Jessica Lang. She's a young choreographer, working often with the American Ballet Theatre. She asked me to create sets and costumes for a new ballet commission for ABT she titled *Garden Blue*. (This premiered at Lincoln Center, in October of 2018.) Jessica approached me knowing a little bit of background on my work, but asked me to create a set without having started her choreography yet. So she started with my rough sketches. And then she kind of filled it in, with all her choreography, music, lighting, and these incredible dancers. I started the process by making a number of sketches and collages with a certain color palette, and what I wanted the backdrop to look like. We sorted through many ideas of what kind of props could exist within a tight budget and a short fabrication deadline. The set design consisted of a 40 by 46-foot painted backdrop and three, lightweight wooden "wings," as I call them, which I based on the form of a seed pod, (those kind of twirling helicopter pods that fall from trees). These were movable, so the dancers were able to interact physically with them. I began by thinking about the color palette that I've used in the past, and especially that hot fluorescent violet color, and those hot reds, and went from there.



Scene from *Garden Blue*. Photo: Rosalie O'Connor. Courtesy American Ballet Theatre.

Rail: This may seem like a lateral segue, but considering his own translation of the painted shape into sculpture, maybe we can consider the Ellsworth Kelly notebooks. You've said previously that these were a big influence on you when you saw them shown at a 2002 exhibition titled *Tablet: 1949–1973* at The Drawing Center.

Crowner: I look at the catalogue for *Tablet* all the time in my studio, and all these post-it notes in between the pages can attest to that. One in particular I flagged is a reproduction of a crushed paper cup...

Rail: It looks like one of those snow cones.

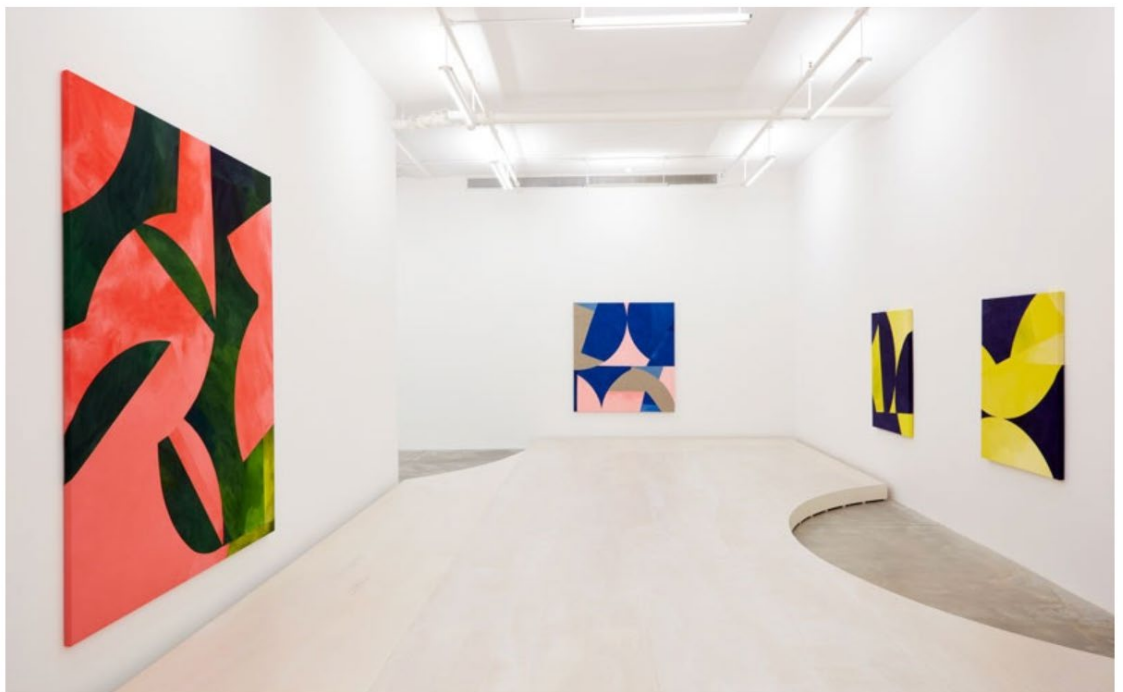
Crowner: Exactly. Yve-Alain Bois has called Kelly's found objects "already-mades," which is lovely. If you look at the crushed cup, you notice two lines reaching each other at a sharp point, at the other end there is a slight curve. What you see is a kind of view into the artist's way of thinking, noticing, paying attention to the world around him. The way he "found shapes" in the physical world. At this point I had already been thinking about Ellsworth Kelly's work, but when I saw The Drawing Center exhibition, it showed me that what I had previously thought about Kelly was all wrong. I thought he was a pure formalist. I used to think there was something reverent and holy about his work: the perfection of the curve, the perfect yellow field. And then I realized that so many of his compositions come from objects and images found in everyday life. That crushed cup somehow may or may not lead to a painting of a triangle with one curved side. The work here sits between collage and geometric abstraction. Which is something that I was really beginning to identify with, decontextualizing shapes and extracting them.

Rail: You've reconsidered that critical argument of formalism—where it comes from and the supposed purity or impurity of abstract form, that it doesn't necessarily have to follow a determined art historical arc.

Crowner: Yes, and inspiration comes from different places and times. For instance, I love looking at the Russian constructivists. And I was thinking about abstraction as a way into revolution. and, you know, so many other artists deploying everyday content as form. On the other hand, I also think about Kelly. And then I'm thinking about Lygia Clark or Hélio Oiticica...

Rail: And considering both Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica's extension of their painting into environmental and performative situations, you share their same capacity to displace the argument of formalist purity someplace more productive.

Crowner: Turning formalist purity into something more productive—this idea makes me want to go back to the stage and the theatrical sets, and talk about the raised tile and plywood platform installations again. With these works I wanted the viewer to experience the step-up: what happens when you step on stage, that kind of new psychological space that says, “I’m on stage now but I feel different. I don’t know if I’m nervous. I don’t know if I want to sing. I don’t know what I want to do, but I feel different than I did a minute ago when I was standing on a concrete floor.” And it’s not just the simple difference of standing on a concrete floor, which is cold and hard, and then standing on a smooth, hollow, bendable plywood floor. There’s also a psychological shift. I wanted people to enter into a different mental space, which is more active, and less passive. Through simple means I wanted to create this shift of moving from a visual experience to a physical, bodily one. And I think that by standing on this space, one does feel more active, more of a protagonist. And at times the leading edge of the stage might be curved inward, as in *Weeds* (2018, Casey Kaplan). In the back of the gallery, there were also curved cutouts in the platform, and so the cutouts that are in this kind of space here, mimicking literally the curves in the paintings on the walls. So I wanted to create a relationship between what’s on the wall and what’s on the floor; what your body feels as you move around the space with what you see on the painting. It’s another way of trying to animate or bring the painting in, back into the body.



Installation view, *Sarah Crowner: Weeds*, Casey Kaplan, New York, February 26 - April 21. Photo: Jason Wyche. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

Rail: With regards to that recurring shape, the curve as in *Weeds* and then, you know, the curve being abruptly cut-off as it were I was thinking of the term, "a circumscribed arabesque." So, so that you have the movement, but then there's a foreshortening, which is also a kind of a conceptual abbreviation which it doesn't allow you to follow through on the arabesque. The boundaries of these limits are like a jetty into the ocean, you know, creates a wave resistance.

Crowner: It is control. But it's also imagining. It makes one's mind invent or imagine, because it's a truncated or a chopped curve, that it's going to continue and become part of an overall circle. There is a "pointing to," an endlessness or an openness, but also "paying attention to" the architecture of the gallery and respecting those boundaries, yet directing you outside of it as well.

Rail: A staged intervention with the square-ness of the white cube. Compositional tropes in your recent show recall Matisse's circa 1909 painting *Bathers by the River*. It was one of his paintings he considered a most important transitional piece. It expresses that feeling of sequence and it has that feeling of the interrupted arabesque and I'm thinking of it in consideration of, again, "the time of shape"—how you're focused on bringing time to your work, in a pictorial sense, in terms of the sequencing and the modality of your composition—how painters consider abstraction, perhaps the quantum level of how artists think about lending shape to time and vice versa.

Crowner: What do you mean by time as it relates to composition?

Rail: Well, it's like an old-fashioned filmstrip, you know: how the figures unfold and mutate sequentially across vertical boundaries, somewhat like his sculptural "Back Series," also dated beginning 1909, installed in MoMA's sculpture garden.



Installation view, Sarah Crowner, Casey Kaplan, New York, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

Crowner: I love that painting. I love his use of verticals. Maybe it even relates to my recent paintings, *Night Painting with Verticals*, and *Orange and Others* (both 2020) in the current show. I was experimenting with a new format, which is very horizontal; the size is 208 inches by 72 inches. Almost human height, but very panoramic. I was looking to make a painting with strong verticals. I was thinking about the way one could read this painting, like a filmstrip—something to be read in a specific direction, to start. And this was very new to me. I think I was also going back to the idea of the backdrop with these, because of the scale.

Rail: You know the thing about Matisse is, he's so simple and direct that it's ... there's so much, so go ahead and continue much work that could be directly you know, morphologically connected to Matisse, though not necessarily through a direct formal lineage. These large horizontal pieces of yours also have a lot of negative space in them, as opposed to some of the other paintings in the show, but you do tend to work with the literal cut-outs of your pattern and sewing process, correct?

Crowner: Right. For instance, if you first look at the *Medusa* painting (2020), which is quite large. It's very intricate painting with around 67 sections that were painted and sewn. Through the process of making this one I wound up with a mountain of these "negative" violet shapes that fed into the painting *Rising Violets* (2020). As I wasn't ready to recycle the pieces, I took these "accidental" or discarded shapes and I turned them into a new work. I work mostly on the floor, beginning by throwing down shapes and arranging them variously and walking around the shapes laid out on the floor. I don't compose top to bottom, left to right, but just walk around constantly as if I was moving paper and making a collage. And so finally I arrive at a composition that makes sense, or I think has potential, and then those shapes get carefully pinned together. And then we (with my assistants) sew the pieces together using an industrial sewing machine. Next, the stitched shapes get stretched over a wooden stretcher bar. I think there's a kind of a *fast* process, which is like the way you might make a collage: very fast, very kind of instinctual, moving shapes around, and then there's a slowness, which is the pinning and the sewing. Later, after it's hanging on the wall, I might look at it and say it's terrible, or it needs to go upside down, or it needs to be twice as large or twice as small. And then I'll take it off the stretcher bar and cut it up again, rearrange it and keep working with it until I arrive at the place that I can say that it's finished. When you came to the gallery, we talked a bit about velocity—maybe that wasn't the word we used—but ideas around slowness and speed and we talked about that in terms of performance, but now I'm talking about in terms of my process. And I think that's what's interesting to me, these two ways of attitudes: the logical and the emotional, or the spontaneous and the deliberate.



Sarah Crowner, *Rising Violets*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, sewn. 92 x 65 inches. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

Rail: Perhaps you're reconciling that reflexive division of mental labor with form. Aspects of your process made me think of the extraordinary "abstractions" of the Gee's Bend quilts. If you compare those with the early collages of early Jack Youngerman and Ellsworth Kelly they all incorporate "scrap form." Like you'll incorporate scraps into a painting.

Crowner: I sometimes call them leftover pieces. But that's what they are. They're "accidental" negative shapes. And I like that quality of chance: that they simply happen by cutting out a positive shape out of canvas. And I don't know really what the composition is going to look like until it's stretched and on the wall.

Rail: I believe that there is a, a very specific idiom in quilting where one intentionally utilizes or highlights scraps in a composition.

Crowner: I do like this place between chance and choice.

Rail: It's obvious physical assemblage of your work is central to it's reception, yet unfortunate that this doesn't come across in reproduction. When we met during your recent show at the gallery, I remarked that each painting has its own kind of personality, even though you're working in these sequential modalities and the repetition of form. It was fascinating to me too that each painting has its own kind of conceptual logic and painterly phenomenology. And you mentioned that the painting, that *Medusa* painting, was specifically influenced by your encounter with ancient sculpture in Rome.

Crowner: *Medusa* was the first painting that I made for this show. And as you can see, the action is happening in the very center of the composition. And none of the little swirly, snakey kind of white shapes wrap around the sides. They all are contained in a kind of frontal frame. I started working on this when I was in Rome this past winter. *Medusa* was specifically inspired by a visit to the Capitoline Museum in Rome last January and seeing stone sculptures of animals and humanesque figures with hair and body hair and fur. I love looking at the treatment of this carved fur, carved hair, for example this lion's mane. I saw this red faun in particular with intricately carved fur from the Roman era. I made a series of ink drawings based on that. Another sculpture I couldn't stop thinking about was Bernini's *Medusa* (ca. 1636), with squirming snakes carved in stone on her head. Which seemed like a good metaphor for these anxious times.



Sarah Crowner, *Medusa*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, sewn. 120 x 104 inches. Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

Rail: I noticed *Medusa* as significantly different from the others in the show because like you mentioned the centralized “figure” doesn't touch the edges, and hence one tends to read it more iconically. Also significant is it's morphology influenced by an already stylized form in the Capitoline sculptures. *Medusa* too represents a real technical tour de force: the complexity of its multiple sewn shapes in concert with calmly modulated values of what appear to be saturated violet dyes.

Crowner: It does have a very soft feeling.

Rail: There's an extraordinary amount of like watercolor-type gesture. And when these color washes are sewn next to one another the juxtaposition evolves into kind of abstract chiaroscuro between a piece that's a little bit lighter in value and a piece that's darker, not unlike how the overall sparkling impression of light in a Vermeer is derived from multiple instances of simultaneous contrast which he so carefully arranged. And there's orchestration of those literally sewn forms with subtle tonal shifts so that the color itself kind of mimics the waves of stylized gesture in a very comprehensive way.

Crowner: A lot of which comes from finding practical solutions, but also the feeling and possibilities of shapes.