

The Big Bend Sentinel

Cantrell, Mary: *'A painting you can walk on': Special exhibition by artist Sarah Crowner opens this weekend at the Chinati Foundation*

5 October 2022



'A painting you can walk on': Special exhibition by artist Sarah Crowner opens this weekend at the Chinati Foundation



Detail of "Platform (Blue Green Terracotta for JC)," 2022, a special exhibition opening this weekend by artist Sarah Crowner at the Chinati Foundation. Photo courtesy the artist.

MARFA — Visitors to the Chinati Foundation's special exhibition space this weekend will encounter an elevated 80-foot-long blue-green terracotta tile installation by abstract painter Sarah Crowner that they are invited to step up onto.

Crowner, who considers the work a painting and has previously created tile experiences, designed the piece as a platform to be raised off of the ground 6 inches and recessed from the wall in an effort to create a stage, prompting viewers to address how one's state of mind can quickly change when stepping onto, or into, a new environment.

“It’s tile, but it’s also gesture, color, hard edge, pattern. All the things that we talk about when we talk about painting — at least in a formal sense. So it’s like walking on a painting. How does that feel?” said Crowner.

The site-specific work, titled “Platform (Blue Green Terracotta for JC),” will be on view until Summer 2024 along with a number of sculptures and photographs by John Chamberlain from Chinati’s permanent collection. Chinati curator Ingrid Schaffner invited Crowner, who was in town for an artist residency at the foundation in March and August, to put on the exhibition.

Artworks by Chamberlain and Crowner will not simply be installed in the same space, but will be in dialogue, each evoking a sense of moving water. Crowner’s undulating tile, placed in a chevron pattern, pays homage to a project once imagined by Chamberlain. Inspired by the defunct pool on the Chinati grounds, which once served soldiers during the Fort D.A. Russell era, and to this day appears as a white castle, Chamberlain imagined an underwater ceramic sculpture environment.

“There’s a kind of conjuring of this unrealized John Chamberlain project,” said Schaffner. “I brought [Crowner] into this history, which is what got us started talking about doing this project.”



An installation view of artist Sarah Crowner’s “Platform (Blue Green Terracotta for JC)” now on view at the Chinati Foundation. Cerámica Suro, Guadalajara, Mexico; Ramos Tile Service, El Paso, Texas; and SILLA, Marfa, Texas, all helped see the project to fruition. Photo courtesy the Chinati Foundation.

The incorporation of Chamberlain's photographs represents a lesser known part of his artistic practice. The images were shot with a wide-angle camera while the artist moved, resulting in semi-aquatic photographs of stretched light and movement. Crowner, as an artist, is interested in connecting with past artists and works, said Schaffner, and symbolically picked up the thread of the project left by Chamberlain long ago.

Crowner said for her, the large-scale blue-green tile platform overlaps disciplines she practices of painting, architecture, performance and art history. The artist was keeping in mind the legacies of not only Chamberlain, but Donald Judd, when designing the work.

"That's what I'm really happy about, is the way that it kind of brings all of these interests in my regular studio practice together into one kind of experience," said Crowner.

The terracotta tile platform came together by the work of many hands. Cerámica Suro, located in Guadalajara, who Crowner has worked with for over 10 years, fabricated the tiles. Ramos Tile Service, out of El Paso, and SILLA, out of Marfa, helped lay the tile and build the platform, which Schaffner said is "a work of art in itself," due to complications with the floor of the old barracks not being level. With a total of 4,000 tiles covering 2,000 square feet, the piece is monumental, yet each tile is unique, resulting in an overall handmade quality, said Schaffner.

"[At the Chinati Foundation] things have a sense of being fabricated, of industrial processes and materials, this is really quite in contrast to much of what is here," said Schaffner.



Detail of "Platform (Blue Green Terracotta for JC)," 2022, a special exhibition opening this weekend by artist Sarah Crowner at the Chinati Foundation. Photo courtesy the artist.

One glassy tile bears the print of a cat's paw who likely sauntered across the tile while it lay outside to dry. The glaze appears differently on each tile, due to the variability of the firing process, and various lines created by the grout give the work a sense of movement, much like a wave. The natural light which flows in through the windows causes the tile pool and surrounding walls to glow during certain times of the day.

"You have this impression when you're there for a period of time of really being engaged and immersed in a space of blue or a space of blue-green or a moving, active space," said Crowner.

The artist's work is a reminder that in the Chihuahuan Desert the sense of calm derived from time spent gazing into a body of water is always welcome. Crowner will be traveling from New York, where she is based, for Chinati Weekend. Schaffner and Crowner will be in discussion at 3 p.m. Saturday, October 8, for an artist's talk at the Crowley Theater, 98 South Austin Street.