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Plowden, Grace: *“The Sea, the Sky, a Window”*: A Reflection

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“The Sea, the Sky, a Window”: A Reflection



Installation view, 2024, Sarah Crowner, Hill Art Foundation, New York, NY.

Walk into the main room of the glass-walled Chelsea gallery and you will first be impressed by the bold, lightning-shaped silhouette of a bronze sculpture by Cy Twombly. Then you’ll notice its texture. The nobs. The crags. The finger marks that trace how his hands worked over the cool grey surface. Such details would be less striking if not for the crisp blues of the canvas directly behind it. This canvas is large, 2.4 x 5.7m large, and composed of skyscraper-like panels in different shades of blue—each of which was carefully chosen and applied by Brooklyn-based artist Sarah Crowner, so you wouldn’t lose “any line, any wiggle, any edge.” Within each panel, neither the blues nor the direction of the brushstrokes is uniform, creating the impression that a child colored them in with big blue felt tip pens. At the top of Crowner’s canvas, and the two similar works on adjacent walls, is a foot or so she left unpainted, suggesting low-hanging clouds cutting across a city skyline or the slope of a wave, marking the point where the sea meets the sky.



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Sarah Crowner's latest exhibition, "The Sea, the Sky, a Window," (Hill Art Foundation, until 17th February), was inspired by the work of Italian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa. In the 1950s, Scarpa renovated Palermo's Palazzo Abatellis, a fifteenth-century palace that had been destroyed during World War II. The new building was to house the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, which was to showcase the best art of the region. One of Scarpa's innovations was to place alabaster busts by the medieval sculptor Francesco Larana in front of brightly colored backdrops. "His work is really painterly," Crowner explained to Levi Probaum, who wrote the show's curatorial essay. "To choose such strong colors to frame a sculpture is a gesture that emphasizes the silhouettes better than a white wall ever could."



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Prombaum writes that Crowner’s canvases “unapologetically present themselves as backdrops for Twombly’s artworks, like a playful inversion of Barnett Newman’s mid-century dictum that ‘sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting.’” But while they are backdrops, they aren’t *just* backdrops. The difference between foreground and backdrop is, after all, just a matter of perspective. On the second floor of the exhibition, two of Crowner’s own bronze sculptures—smooth, molten, ashtray-like forms—sit in front of *Candlelight* (2022), a stained-glass window by the contemporary American artist Spencer Finch. Finch’s window looks like a patchwork quilt of Quality Street wrappers, through which your view of the High Line is tinted Strawberry Delight red, Fudge pink, and Toffee Finger yellow. It initially serves as the backdrop for Crowner’s work, but move between the two, turn your back to *Candlelight*, and the roles are reversed. Crowner’s lumpy bronze surfaces collect and reflect the window’s iridescence, becoming backdrops, settings, stages even, for Finch’s work in turn.

This juxtaposition is particularly telling of how Crowner imagined the exhibition. As she told Prombaum of her three Twombly-inspired canvases, “They are paintings that replace windows, and that act as windows. I’ve been thinking about the window not only as a metaphor for painting,” she continued, “like that classic Renaissance view of the painting as a window *onto* the world. Paintings and windows are also a kind of staging ground. Through them, we learn so much *about* the world. We pay attention to what’s around it, to what’s through it. We pay attention to where we are standing.” Like *Candlelight*, her canvases are both foreground and backdrop to Twombly’s sculptures. The latter, for example, serve as windows onto historic ideas about sculpture that help contextualize Crowner’s own artistic practice. She, in fact, considers her canvases sculptures rather than paintings because of their materiality. Look closely and you will see that the panels aren’t bordered by superficial lines but seams. She cuts out each section like a tailor’s pattern, before painting them and fixing them together with an industrial sewing machine. Like Twombly’s sculptures, Crowner’s canvases remember how they were shaped by the artist’s hands.

The Hill Art Foundation is itself an apt backdrop for Crowner’s project. Not only is the Peter Marino-designed corner gallery walled by windows—through which you can see residential buildings on 10th Avenue, the High Line, and a drive-through car-wash—but it also floods the space with beams of light that shift slowly over the course of the day. At times, the raised stage of sky-blue terracotta tiles that Crowner made specifically for the space, *Platform (Stretched Pentagons)* (2023), is reflected by the glass, making it seem like the tiles extend over West 24th Street. And sometimes, the silhouettes of the gallery’s windows are themselves reflected onto the side of the skyscraper two doors down.

What’s more, one of the Foundation’s aims is to connect the dots between different artistic movements through meaningful juxtapositions. A recent exhibition at the gallery, “Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained,” curated by the postmodern artist David Salle, brought together paintings and sculptures from different eras to explore the nature of affinity. “How can works of art be said to ‘recognize’ each other?” Salle asked. “What can they bring to one another? How can they animate each other anew in different contexts?”



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Sarah Crowner thinks of art history as a medium—both as material to be worked with and as a medium through which she can channel other people’s voices and ideas, reanimating them in the contemporary moment. “Much of my work has involved taking apart and putting back together parts and fragments of other paintings,” she told curator Bartholomew Ryan. “My own, and those borrowed from other voices.” Along with Scarpa and Twombly, other voices present in “The Sea, the Sky, a Window,” include hard-edge painter Ellsworth Kelley and a backdrop that Ray Johnson designed for a 1957 *Harper’s* editorial. (Her Johnson-inspired canvas, *Rotated two-way Arabesque* (2015), was, however, the only work that felt incongruous with the rest of the show, in spite of its origin story.)

The artist’s obsession with in-between spaces informs her approach to her tile works. In *Platform* (2023), for example, Crowner uses a pattern of stretched pentagons that was discovered by mathematicians in 2015. Each pentagon needs to be placed opposite its inverse for the pattern to work, and en masse, the glazed blues seem to ripple on the diagonal, like water disturbed by a wake. While she tends to paint her tiles vibrant colors, she is more interested in the grouting—by the movements it can suggest and by the way it holds the tiles in place.

For all that Crowner’s practice is a cerebral, informed by a wide range of superstar artists, ‘minor’ modernists, and heady thinkers alike (including Wittgenstein: cf. *Swan Hook* and *Hook Swan* (both 2015)), her work itself is accessible and experiential. You can, in fact, walk on many of her tile works, including *Platform*. Crowner’s exhibitions are almost architectural in the way they consider how bodies will move around the space. (*Beetle in the Leaves*, her 2016 exhibition at MASS MoCA was so attentive to this that her tiled platform was wheelchair accessible). Crowner wants her work to be “immersive.” This is not, however, immersion for the sake of escapism, but rather, immersion for a deeper awareness of the relationship between your body and the space around it. Walk around the

Hill Art Foundation and you will notice that Crowner's canvas 'windows' aren't shielded by glass. You are both part of the exhibition, and part of its surroundings.

The corporeal aspect of "The Sea, the Sky, a Window," will be further emphasized over the last three days of the show, when artist and choreographer Madeline Hollander will "activate" *Platform* by using it as a stage. "The piece will focus primarily on intricate and repetitive footwork rhythms and trajectories that will continue up through the dancer's torsos, limbs and hands."