

Stefanie Brehm's Celebrations of Color

by John Yau

I first met Stefanie Brehm in 2013 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where she was a student in the class of my friend Norbert Prangenberg (1949-2012). During our conversation I learned that she and her family had recently been in Chile and that they were planning on going there again as her husband had family there. This prompted me to give Stefanie the email of my friend, the Chilean artist Francisca Sutil, who I had met years earlier, shortly after she got her MFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

I mention these connections and meetings because I feel they are an important part of the art world and how it works. You meet someone and years go by and then, for whatever reason, your paths cross again. Such is the case with Stefanie Brehm, whose work I saw briefly during my time in Munich as a visiting professor, and which left a strong impression on me. When she recently wrote to me, I was delighted to learn about her latest work, and the direction that she had taken since I last saw her.

One of the things that struck me while I was at the Academy of Fine Arts was that students were encouraged to work in different mediums. In order to help them, the school provided experts to teach students who wished to learn a wide range of methods and processes, from ceramics, glass blowing and welding to stone carving and working with plastics, such as polyurethane. This meant that students did not have to become wedded to a material or a technique.

Brehm is an abstract artist who is adept at a number of mediums, including ceramics and polyurethane. Recently, she has been working with three different forms: ceramic columns of varying heights, large ceramic discs mounted on the wall, and poured "brushstrokes" which are lines and bands of polyurethane which can be temporarily affixed directly to the wall. In each of these works, Brehm finds ways to use the particular materials that she is working with, for example clay and plastic, to explore color relationships.

In America, during the 1950s and 60s, in the aftermath of Jackson Pollock's breakthrough into pure abstract, artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis further freed color from a descriptive context until it became the subject of the work.

Another change that took place around the same time was in ceramics, when Peter Voulkos, inspired by the Abstract Expressionists like Pollock, became the first ceramic artist to break down the barrier separating the functional with the purely aesthetic object. Voulkos' breakthrough, which has been well documented, culminated in his 1959 exhibition of huge ceramic sculptures at the Landau Gallery in Los Angeles.

The territory that Brehm is exploring with confidence and verve is bordered by Color Field painting and abstract ceramic sculpture and by artists such as Frankenthaler, Dan Christensen, Voukos, and Jun Kaneko. But where she has gone with these art historical precedents is into a place that is all her own.

While it is clear that her work in different mediums is the culmination of a labor-intensive process, Brehm never makes her considerable effort the point of the viewer's experience. The columns, with their different manifestations of color as overlapping veils, different shapes, and densities of line, are nuanced and direct. The marks evoke abstract painting and graffiti and the constantly busy urban world, while the abstract columns succinctly evoke the classical world and architecture. More importantly, they exist in the continuously unfolding present tense. You cannot see the colors and shapes all at once as they continue and change as they move around the column, reminding you that the world is full of glimpses and ephemeral moments.

Brehm's ceramic columns collapse the porous wall between painting and sculpture: they are paintings in the round. Some are so small they can be held in one's hands and turned over like a talisman. Others are monumental and the viewer must walk around them to see the colors and shapes on their surface. Brehm's discs and polyurethane forms expand our understanding of painting without resorting to irony or pastiche. Her unpredictable use of color evokes nature and cosmetics, the natural and the artificial, while attaining freedom from such familiar and namable phenomenon as clouds, mountains or bodies.

I can imagine Brehm's columns placed on a busy city street or intersection, and the pleasure they could bring to pedestrians. What all of her work shares is the ability to slow our looking down by quietly inviting us to pause for a moment and relish the subtle nameless joys that color can stir up in us.