

The light fantastic

By Brent Gregston



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Kristin Baker fills larger-than-life works with exploding shards of light and color

She is just 37, but Kristin Baker has emerged as one of America's most original abstract artists. She has had solo exhibitions at the Pompidou in Paris, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and, this spring, at the new Suzanne Geiss gallery in Soho, New York. Heavyweight collectors François Pinault and Charles Saatchi have bought her billboard-size paintings. Baker applies fast-drying acrylic paint in vibrant hues across vast sheets of opaque PVC or clear acrylic. There are no brushes, no canvas.

Q Do you always think big when you paint?

A No, I don't necessarily think big. My thinking is more fragmented. But I do desire a large area to work my ideas out. I also prefer a scale that engages me physically and the viewer experientially.

Q Can you tell us about the way you work?

A My primary tools are metal wall scrapers. The scrapers are often large and have razor sharp

edges, which allow me to move a lot of paint around at once and incorporate diverse transparent layers. Many times, I outline shapes with tape and fill them in. I like to think that I'm creating special effects with the scrapers in order to achieve spatial effects.

Q What role does photography play in your work?

A With the earlier work it played an important role in that many times I would paint from photographs. At that time, I was very interested in the conversation between painting and photography. I attempted to make areas of the paint mirror photographic qualities like the surface and emulsion of film. Today, I am not as directly referencing photographs, however, I continue to emulate photographic attributes. This allows my work to have a dialogue with how most people encounter images today.

Q "Speed, technology and violence in a nutshell" – that's the kind of painting you create. Does that mean you paint fast as well?

A I do paint fast. The acrylic dries very fast so I usually paint in sections in a fast, physical way. It takes a lot of energy. However, the thinking and decision-making part of the process is much more down tempo.

Q What did it feel like to have a solo show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2004, when you weren't even 30? Or when Pinault and Saatchi started collecting your work? Did it ever make you self-conscious as an artist?

A I am a shy person by nature. However, I am very dedicated to painting, and it would not matter to me if I had these shows or not. I will always be doing what I do.

Q Why did you abandon painting racecars for reworking famous masterpieces? Why did you choose Tintoretto's "Crucifixion" and Cézanne's "Bathers"?

A Although I am most interested in non-representational work, I was inclined to revisit a more traditional representation of painting. I wanted to demonstrate to myself that I could paint landscapes, too. I was also drawing a link between the drama of our time and that of times past.

Q Your recent paintings seem to be more purely abstract explorations of color and light – light cascading, fading, refracting. Do you feel you've set out in a new direction?

A These have consistently been elements in my work, but now they have taken precedence. The materials are in the forefront and, consequently, this means color and light.

Q Racecars, art history, wine from Burgundy – is there a common source of inspiration?

A I work from knowledge, love and bewilderment.

Kristin Baker's solo exhibit "Illume-Mine" is on view until June 23 at the Suzanne Geiss gallery, 76 Grand St., New York, tel. 1.212.625.8130, www.suzannegeiss.com