

Michelle Grabner

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



Michelle Grabner, *Untitled*, 2014, enamel on canvas over panel, 30 × 30 × 1 3/4".

"The great artist of tomorrow will go underground," Marcel Duchamp predicted. And how much farther underground can the artist go than adopting the guise of a midwestern suburban housewife? As Thierry de Duve recently pointed out in these pages, the fundamental upshot of Duchamp's work is not that anything can be an art object but that anyone can be an artist. But are we willing to accept that? Nearly a century after *Fountain*, Michelle Grabner has proved that the answer is no—some of us are not willing to accept that anyone can be an artist, especially if the person is or appears to be middle-class and female. By including in her recent New York show the video *A Few Minutes with . . . Michelle Grabner*, 2014, a brief profile by David Robbins, the artist set out the bait that an unwary *New York Times* critic took with unseemly relish. Robbins, of course, is the Milwaukee-based artist still best known for his seminal 1986 *Talent*, a

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suite of black-and-white photos showing the then-reigning generation of New York post-Conceptualists (Jenny Holzer, Allan McCollum, Jeff Koons, et al.) through the convention of the actor's headshot. So Robbins knows two or three things about the ironies and ambiguities of artists' self-presentation. Yet somehow Ken Johnson took Robbins's portrait of the artist as suburbanite at face value, using it as cause to dismiss Grabner as merely "a comfortably middle-class tenured professor and soccer mom." Only if the show were a satire of such a figure, apparently, could it be "funny and possibly illuminating."

But Grabner plays it straight, or nearly so. Just as she conscientiously weaves a lattice top for her pie, as Robbins's video shows, so she interlaces the strips of colored paper that go into her geometrically patterned woven drawings. A mass of these drawings were shown here, incorporated into installations in which they are laid flat, overlapping (so it is clear they are not autonomous compositions) on knee-high platforms, in one case (*Untitled*; all works 2014) juxtaposed with photographic close-ups of checked fabrics (all also *Untitled*); in another, forming part of a larger work, *My Oyster* (made in collaboration with her husband, Brad Killam), which also includes a massive, unwieldy hanging-mobile assemblage that incorporates flattened garbage-can lids, a couple of painted tondos, some children's furniture, and a color photograph of the Grabner/Killam family in their yard. Individually, the woven drawings go past "My kid could make that" into the realm of "My kid *did* make that": In Robbins's video, Grabner explains that she started making these after her son made one in kindergarten. Hers, though, are far more intricate than the ones made in the school arts-and-crafts room, and offer an important clue to her simultaneously analytic and meditative approach to painting.

And though scale alone made that ungainly sculpture the show's unavoidable centerpiece, what really should have been emphasized were the paintings, because they are downright ravishing. There were fifteen of them in the show—nine grisailles and six featuring pale, almost evanescent colors—all made, it seems, by using found crocheted blankets as templates. If the other works in the show disassembled Grabner's pictorial vocabulary into its metaphorical and conceptual parts—pattern, fabric, domesticity—the paintings recombine the parts into wholes in which her normcore really does engender its own sublime. Appearing surpassingly soft from a distance, up close the paintings show their obduracy—and then an intangible light seeps out just at the edge of opacity.

—Barry Schwabsky