

Michele Araujo | Playing Around: The Vulnerable Paintings
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I recently wrote about how the artist Li Trincere's works have been made contextless, because the history of the generation of the mid-70s and their various practices and aesthetics are under erasure. Michele Araujo has just the opposite challenge – her aesthetic has a surplus of history, so much so that at least in the States it is prohibitive. I say this because in Europe, South and Latin America, one can evidently be a third-generation practitioner of a style or movement and still be held in esteem. This is because they hold that the full potential of a practice cannot be realized by a single generation. In the States, instead we are caught up in the progressive developmental paradigm of innovation and negation where each new thing brings its predecessor to an end. Obviously, these are two very different understandings of what it means to work within a tradition and how the art market responds to these definitions.

In many cultures traditions remain dynamic and continue to develop as they pass from one generation to another – to maintain a tradition does not mean making it formulaic or ritualistic – think of Concrete and Neo-Concrete Art. In the US the attitude toward the historical record is one of, done that – what's next? Rather than living history, from this perspective history is seen as a record of a past not worth revisiting. The cultural environment has come to be re-ordered by the idea of profiting from the next big thing. This is the logic of capitalism applied to culture – in other words, an artist working in a given tradition may be making a cultural contribution but have no real marketable value e.g., they are made critically insignificant. This is the double bind artists such as Araujo are caught up in.

In Araujo's case she is working to sustain and expand upon the field of gestural abstract painting, which has passed into its fourth or fifth generation. Working with a fully stocked AbEx pantry, without a recipe – there is an uncertainty that runs through her work – there is a tendency to over or under work a given piece at times – this demonstrates that Araujo results are not predetermined. We may conclude from this that Araujo is seeking to unfashionably, sustain a belief in what Jacques Derrida called the "truth in painting" – that is her paintings are factual rather than metaphorical or anecdotal in that they uphold the idea of the authenticity of the aesthetic experience. Interestingly, she has titled the suite of works that this show was selected from: The Vulnerable Paintings.

If you ask me if Araujo is good at what she does, my answer would be; some results are better than others, but this again is a question of taste and the standards to which we hold her. Likewise, is what Araujo does unique? –The answer is sometimes, given her approach centers on her sensibility and subjectivity and her method is one of the trial and error. This is indicated by the sampling of mixed media works that make up this show. Produced over the last three year,

different works have differing objectives and therefore must be judged differently. Despite all the uncertainty and struggle this implies Araujo's aesthetic remains surprisingly lyrical.

To begin with, Araujo is a formalist, who improvises by playing off certain conventions in unexpected ways — sometimes she mixes them together and at other times she undermines or extends them in ways they were never intended to be. For instance, the works in this exhibition revolve around her use of the vocabulary of papier collé, which she adapts to that of gestural painting. The collaged materials in this exhibition appear to be cut-up pieces of paper to which she has applied paint — perhaps they are scraps from discarded works on paper. Most often these materials are either integrated into the painting's composition or float across the surface like a piece of paper caught in a breeze. The exception is "Inventory # 1865, Untitled", 2019 in which Araujo uses swatches of a manufactured stripe material to frame a blob-ish, painterly pink and white form. Likewise, most of her works she seldom paints into or over the collage elements. It is apparent that in most cases the paper elements are applied in response to the painted ground, which was in itself completed before the they were added — it appears she uses the collage to finish the painting.

What is of interest is while Araujo's works have a period aura, they are not nostalgic nor are they post-modern contrivances or simulacra. These works are neither eclectic nor a pastiche, so while other artists may come to mind, no one particular artist is Araujo's source. Instead, she seeks to preserve the dynamic of the tradition of painterly abstractions. Rather than merely adopt, or ironically mimic the achievement of others, it appears her intention is to inhabit this tradition so as to make it her own. Given this ambition the show should have been called "Mining the Field."

Michele Araujo: The Vulnerable Paintings

OSMOS, January 26, 2023 - March 4, 2023, Thursday - Saturday 12 - 6 pm