

SABINA OTT

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# NEW WORK

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7 FEBRUARY 1989

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THROUGH 26 MARCH 1989

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SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM

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OF MODERN ART

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A SERIES OF RECENT

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WORK BY YOUNGER AND

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ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

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On first sight, Sabina Ott's large paintings invite comparison with the "deconstructivist" work of such New York based artists as David Salle or Robert Longo, whose basic tactic is to juxtapose images so disparate or ambiguous in nature that any attempt to "read" sense into them is almost certain to be frustrated. By emphasizing the contingent nature of all image-making, the images cancel one another out: everything becomes arbitrary and leads the viewer to question why these various objects and images were chosen in the first place. Such questions, of course, can lead quickly to the nature and status of who decides these things and who is served by the decisions. By this time the debate, as intended, is as much about society and politics as it is about art.

In its denial of the primacy of style—a cardinal tenet of Modernist art—such painting can be described as 'postmodernist.' The forging of a single style once seen as the great liberator of truth, is now regarded by many as having all the expressive possibilities of a straight jacket, and it is not uncommon to find an artist working in two or three discrete modes. Freed from the structure of style, the theory goes, the artist is able to borrow at will from any period of art history that he or she finds useful. "Appropriation," a tactic that first appeared in the Pop art era of the early sixties, now appears to be a major strategy.

If Sabina Ott's paintings demonstrate a relationship to and an awareness of these characteristics, they are very different in intent, means, and, therefore, in end. Where much Postmodernist painting tends to deflate if not actually undermine expectations as the first step toward a new order of nonhierarchical imagery, Ott accepts as her starting point the ability of—even the need for—painting to communicate and enhance understanding. The images may look disparate—wheel barrows and sea-scapes, or diamond rings and wood scenes in earlier work—but they are all *painted*: any sense of collage is simulated, and everything is described, as it were, in the same voice.

Ott's work differs from much Modern and Postmodern art in that narrative plays an important role. "One of the functions of my art," Ott has written, "is to be in continuity with an ancestral line by the telling of tales in a historically inclusive, current cultural language (that is itself always changing)."<sup>1</sup> Like the Surrealists, Ott's lovingly painted images are juxtaposed to stimulate a search for connections in the mind of the viewer—a search that will, she hopes, be rewarded by something like a warm glow of recognition rather than the chilling realization that it may be time to go back to square one. To this end, she has said, "The kind of images I pick are very consistent—I tend to pick things that are really loaded and tend to have multiple meanings to them."<sup>2</sup>

Even so, in Ott's mind, each painting has a distinct theme. A spinning wheel (borrowed from Van Gogh) in one panel, alongside a "very romantic, yet almost hotel art-like landscape" was, she suggests, "about the inevitability of labor, the romance of industry [but] also about time—I was trying to use styles of different periods and direct them."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the eerie *Material Fictions* #3 of 1988, the artist gives visual form to her feelings after a recent stay in Berlin. The diptych form here aptly symbolizes the divided city, the left panel of which contains shadowy tree forms (described by the artist as "negative space") that are more explicitly rendered in the right panel (positive space). Left, right—east, west: the same language in a different dialect. At the juncture is a large green silhouette of a hand,



*Material Fictions #3*, 1988

a quotation from a sculpture that the artist can no longer recall, making an expressive gesture that one writer has interpreted as the "ancient Mediterranean gesture 'perfect!'"<sup>4</sup> If this is so, the comment is distinctly ironic but to the artist the image carries such connotations as the Benediction, the *Manus Dei* and, being green, the presence (literally "the hand") of Nature. Tucked behind the hand and also on the line dividing the panels, is an ellipse, painted à la Clyfford Still, whose abstract landscapes were another attempt at an artistic perfection that would transcend political and linguistic boundaries.

The elliptical form that appears in all of the *Material Fictions* paintings is, in fact, a mirror:<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, a device that unquestioningly reflects the material *reality* of our world, the mirror also has an impeccable lineage in twentieth-century Modernist painting, traceable to the so-called first collage, Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1911–12, in which the artist drew early attention to the treacherous nature of all image-making. Perhaps more to the point in Ott's work, the mirror also plays an important role in the work of the Surrealists, especially Magritte, who used it to confound expectations and suggest multiple possibilities. More recently, artists as different as Richard Estes and Roy Lichtenstein have exploited the perceptual ambiguities of mirrors, and windows that act as mirrors. In *Material Fictions #3*, the mirror reflects an idealized form of painting as practiced by a high priest of abstraction. In *Material Fictions #5*, mirror and canvas are one. A horizontal line divides the ellipse in half, below which—upside down—is a dark but restful landscape. The impulse to read this as a reflection is frustrated by a near lack of corresponding imagery in the upper half. After all, how can a reflection be more vivid than the source? Instead, the artist has



presented two fusions of nature and two ways of painting. The lower half, dark and brooding, is redolent of nineteenth-century Romanticism, from Delacroix to Redon. The upper part, radiant, bright and painterly, reflects her interest in medieval panel painting where such precious materials as gold and lapis lazuli were laid on grounds of red pigment or brilliant white gesso to create color fields of unrivaled intensity. It also recalls the more recent wedding of landscape and abstraction most notable in the work of Mark Rothko. In the end, just as the juxtaposed images are ultimately to be resolved in the mind of the viewer, it is the artist's intent that the mirrors draw the viewer further into the paintings. While working on them, she was, she has written, "thinking a great deal about the Van Eyck painting *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* and how the mirror operates as a double perspective point—the point at which we enter the painting and are placed, as viewers, within the field of the painting and recognize our own act of viewing."<sup>6</sup>

Graham W. J. Beal  
Elise S. Haas Chief Curator

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#### NOTES

1 Handwritten manuscript, 1988.

2 Tape-recorded interview with the author, at the artist's studio, Los Angeles, 15 November 1988

3 Ibid

4 Mac McCloud, "History Skillfully Manipulated," *Artweek*, 11 June 1988, p. 5

5 Tape-recorded interview, op. cit.

6 Letter to author, undated, 1988

## **SABINA OTT**

Born in New York City, 1955

Lives and works in Los Angeles

## **EDUCATION**

San Francisco Art Institute. B.F.A., 1979; M.F.A., 1981

## **SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**

1982

A.R.E. Gallery, San Francisco

1983

Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art

1985

Attack Gallery, Los Angeles

Charles Cowles Gallery, New York

1986

Davies Long Gallery, Los Angeles

Acme Art, San Francisco

1987

Charles Cowles Gallery, New York

Galerie am Moritzplatz, Berlin

Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago

Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

1988

Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

Art Institute of Southern California, Laguna Beach

## **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

1981

*San Francisco Art Institute Alumni Invitational*,  
Richmond Art Center, California

1982

Emanuel Walter Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute

1983

*Figures in L.A.*, Swope Gallery, Los Angeles

1984

*Orphan Show*, James Turcotte Gallery, Los Angeles

*Night of the Mask*, Newport Harbor Art Museum,  
Newport Beach, California

*Wall Works*, L.A. Artcore, Los Angeles

*The Cotton Exchange Show*, Los Angeles Contemporary  
Exhibitions (LACE)

1985

*Astonishing Horizons*, Los Angeles Visual Arts (LAVA)/  
Pacific Design Center

*Artists from Attack Gallery*, Piezo Electric Gallery,  
New York

*Downtown Artist's Show*, Los Angeles Contemporary  
Exhibitions (LACE)

*Group Show*, Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago

1986

*The Third Western States Exhibition*, Brooklyn Museum

*A Southern California Collection*, Cirrus Gallery,  
Los Angeles

*Group Show*, Acme Art, San Francisco

1987

*New Works*, Charles Cowles Gallery, New York

*Avant-Garde in the Eighties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*10 Jahre Kunst*, Galerie am Moritzplatz, Berlin

*On the Horizon: Emerging in California*, Fresno Arts Center and Museum, California

*Contemporary Diptychs: Divided Visions*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York

*Year 1: A Survey*, Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, California

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Askey, Ruth. "Sabina Ott." *Artscene*, September 1987, pp. 25–26

Brenson, Michael. "How the Myths and Violence of the West Inspire Its Artists." *The New York Times*, 15 June 1986, p. 33.

Christy, Mary Anne. "Acquiring a Taste for Art." *Diversion*, February 1987, p. 161.

Cotter, Holland. "Eight Artists Interviewed." *Art in America*, May 1987, pp. 162–179.

Gardner, Colin. "Attack: Los Angeles." *Arts Magazine*, March 1985, p. 13.

Gipe, Lawrence. "Games of Free Association." *Artweek*, 3 May 1986, p. 7.

Glueck, Grace. "Sabina Ott." *The New York Times*, 13 September 1985.

## CHECKLIST

*Material Fictions: #3*, 1988

oil on canvas

84 x 144" (213.4 x 365.8 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*Material Fictions: #4*, 1988

plaster and oil on canvas and wood panel

132 x 84" (335.3 x 213.4 cm)

Collection of the Carnation Company, Los Angeles

*Material Fictions: #5*, 1988

oil and wax on canvas over wood panel

84 x 120" (213.4 x 304.8 cm)

Collection of Sally Sirkin Lewis, Los Angeles

*Table of Contents: Partnership*, 1988

oil and encaustic on canvas over wood panel

72 x 60" (182.9 x 152.4 cm)

Collection of the Progressive Corporation, Cleveland, Ohio

*Table of Contents: 5 Formation*, 1989

aluminum, metal paint, and oil on wood panel

120 x 96" (243.8 x 304.8 cm)

Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

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