

Houston Chronicle

Gael Stack's artistic vision remains constant

By Molly Glentzer | December 20, 2013



Stack, who has taught at UH for about 40 years, has painted with a consistent vision for decades. She does not name individual works, but this is "#4" behind her.

"I didn't name this show 'Forget-me-nots' for nothing, although I did put the 's' on for distraction purposes," Gael Stack deadpanned the other day, smiling. Never mind that the veteran Houston artist, who has presented annual solo shows almost continuously since the mid-1970s, has work in the collections the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Menil Collection and numerous other top institutions. She seemed genuinely grateful to be asked to talk about her latest pieces, including a group of seven large paintings on canvases of rich blue and a collection of small drawings on paper. This is the first time she's ever shown both types of work together, she said. "It's hard for me to change scale."

Last summer, paint oxidation troubles with her canvases gave Stack more time to draw than usual. "I thought if I had the base made in acrylic it wouldn't happen. But then I had to have the canvases restretched because they were shiny and bumpy," she explained. "It went on and on, and I thought, 'I'll never paint again; I'll never get started.'"

One might wonder how such a thing could happen to an artist whose painting technique appears to have been consistent for decades: Onto a dark base, she sketches complex layers of outlined images in oil sticks of various widths. "Every show I have, the base is different. You'd never know that from looking at them, but I'm always trying to make it better," she said.

I asked if she consciously maintains her style. "I really don't believe in even the notion of a style. ... I could no more paint some other way than I could make my shorthand any different," she said. "In this day and age, when everything has to be sifted through a theory, it leaves out the poetics, the possibility, of things being said a different way."

Around us, the gorgeous blue canvases floated, full of mystery, like vast interior universes awash in cryptic messages, enigmatic figures and random-looking objects - images of Renaissance-inspired babies, fences, Japanese teapots from the Middle Ages, green beans, lanterns, pieces of flying paper, rakes, plungers, a wandering figure

with walking sticks. Stack's marks, always both dreamy and unsettling, look like they could dissolve before they're fully formed. They're evidence of a mind in constant "shuffle" mode, randomly stumbling onto bits of the past. "I think they're like consciousness, in a way," Stack said. "They're just snippets of things."

The new drawings have some of the same images, but not all; and some of their complexity comes from being made on both sides of thin paper. Every image, regardless of the medium, has a source. And while each body of work Stack creates has its own theme, the influences are fairly constant - and oddly apparent once you know them. Language and its limits are a major fascination. "I grew up in a family where nobody talked about anything," Stack said. She gravitates to text you can't quite decipher that meant something to its author. "It can't be scribble; it has to have content," she explained. She loves the fragmented writings of people with mental disorders as well as random messages written by her mother. "When she died, I got the notes. I never knew what they meant, but I always thought if I could figure those out, I'd know everything," Stack said.

The gestural ideas of Willem de Kooning, the flat grids of Andy Warhol, the splintered phrases of John Cage and the writings of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett have stayed with her, too. Then there's her appreciation for medieval art, which first stirred during years of Catholic schooling in Chicago. The nuns doled out richly illustrated holy cards as rewards, she said, chuckling, "then there would always be some dark, Catholic message on the back about sin."

The new paintings look slightly more open than some of Stack's previous pieces, as if an airing-out is going on. "These paintings are about absences of things, in a way," she said. "The babies appeared more than I was anticipating, and the language less than I was anticipating. ... They look much calmer than I thought they would." She pointed out the forget-me-nots. "You know there's another name for them, scorpion grass. I almost called them that, then I thought, 'Gael, don't be such a sissy.'" Other "new" flowers show up in these paintings, too, along with blossoms from stencils she's used before. Certain flowers represent people she's loved and admired, among them her mentor George Bunker and fellow artists Jim Love and Chris Plowman. "I never imagined that the stencils would end up being the active things. They are always disoriented, never gravity bound," she said.

She noted the main figure in the new paintings is looking at viewers, not walking away as it has before. Not that any of it is literal. "They're more poetic than narrative. It makes a kind of sense to me, and I hope it will to an audience, because an audience is important. They're curious, aren't they? And they really are the best I can do."



'Gael Stack: Forget-Me-Nots'

When: 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays

Where: Moody Gallery, 2815 Colquitt; www.moodygallery.com