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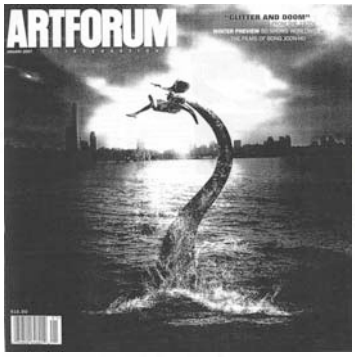

Flat Out

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON SADIE BENNING

Sadie Benning, *Play Pause*, 2006, stills from a black-and-white and color video, 29 minutes 22 seconds.

IN THE AFTERMATH of September 11, Sadie Benning took photographs—hundreds of them—on the streets of Milwaukee and Chicago. That obsessive endeavor turned out to be merely the beginning of a long-term project: Deploying a transfer process modeled on Henry Darger's, Benning started making drawings based on her pictures. These stark black-and-white renderings of train stations, storefronts, and other urban settings, punctuated by static images of television shows and newspaper photos of helmeted soldiers, provided much of the substance for her most ambitious work to date, a video called *Play Pause*, 2006. Like her initial photographic tour, the thirty-minute, two-screen animated video takes a meandering, nonlinear path. There is no single protagonist, but rather a series of loosely connected scenes devoid of dialogue; Benning's adjacent screens play off each other rhythmically, seemingly propelled by ambient loops and pulses of sound that foster a sense of the narrative spiraling and looping back (and that recall Benning's musical background; she was a founding member of feminist indie band Le Tigre). Interspersed throughout are abstract color sequences reminiscent of Oskar Fischinger's pioneering animations. A more decisive break from the monochrome environment of military recruitment centers and car lots occurs when the video moves into a queer bar filled with drag queens and dancing lesbians. With its depiction of intense bursts of all manner of explicit sex, the video's tone shifts from blankly ordinary to exuberant.

Premiering later this month in Benning's first full-scale solo museum exhibition—"Suspended Animation," at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio—*Play Pause* clearly fits into a lineage of "high art" animation that stretches from Fischinger to William Kentridge. A particularly striking aspect of *Play Pause* is its flatness—but this is not Greenbergian flatness, and certainly not Takashi Murakami's Superflatness. It is rather of a different order, both visual and emotional, and better fits within art historian David Joselit's "genealogy of flatness." In his 2000 essay "Notes on Surface," Joselit theorizes how the trope of flatness, far from constituting a characteristic exclusive to modernism, yokes together the optical and the psychological across the purported modern/postmodern divide.

Play Pause, too, asserts a flatness with a surprising elasticity: For one thing, despite its schematic two-dimensionality, it conjures a genuine sensuality. Moreover, it evades the censor—what might be actionably obscene with live bodies is merely pornographic when drawn. The work therefore has the capacity to be more explicit—or expansive—in its view of what forms human relations might take. As Helen Molesworth contends in her catalogue essay for the upcoming Wexner show (curated by the center's Jennifer Lange), *Play Pause* figures the aesthetic and affective baseline of a benumbed, post-9/11 moment but then reimagines it using a disarming, hand-drawn quirkiness.

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With its intimate surfaces, Benning's work finds unexpected kinship with other realms of contemporary culture well beyond the gallery walls. For instance, the Maine National Guard recently began issuing life-size, waist-up cardboard pictures of soldiers stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Made from enlarged, pixelated photos, these "flat daddies," as they are called, are provided to help military families cope with the strain of separation. Perching around dinner tables, attending weddings, and chaperoning parties, the flat daddies make perfect emotional sense within our media landscape's saturation by low-resolution imagery. Viewed on cell-phone screens or on pop-up windows, blurred low-res footage—which reduces dimensionality just as the preternatural clarity of plasma screens heightens it—has become a visual lingua franca. It is this vernacular through which *Play Pause*, at least in part, addresses the viewer.

As such, *Play Pause* extends the concerns that have, as it were, animated Benning's oeuvre from the beginning. The arc of her career is well known: She began making short videos in 1989, when she was only fifteen years old, using a Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera given to her as a present by her father, filmmaker James Benning. Marketed as a toy, the mechanism captures grainy, black-and-white images on audio cassettes, and the teenager's inventive experiments with it quickly established her as an important video artist: In 1993 she became, at age twenty, the youngest person ever included in the Whitney Biennial. Benning's first tapes were roughly edited and, due to the confines of the technology (the camera's short power cord kept her tethered to a plug), usually set in her bedroom in her home in Milwaukee. In videos such as *A New Year*, 1989, and *Living Inside*, 1989, she utilized a limited amount of visual material—slow pans over handwritten intertitles, close-ups of her own eyes—to create moving meditations on urban alienation and youthful yearning.

Even though her early tapes are each only a few minutes long, they have a languid, careful quality, heightened by sophisticated effects like directed lighting and inventive in-camera cuts. By embracing the specific, raw aesthetics of Pixel, she also harked back to video art's roots as a cheaper, quicker, and more accessible alternative to film as opposed to the glossy and expensive media it became in the '90s. From the start, her camera often focused on the human visage—pictures from yearbooks, advertisements, and in particular her own face. Deeply shadowed and at times almost abstracted by Pixelvision's high contrast, her features are distilled down to a few distinctly adolescent elements: a nose ring, a pimple, a mouth blowing

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Sadie Benning, *Untitled*, 2001, Flashe paint on canvas, 81 x 66".

chewing-gum bubbles. With their gutter-box frames and a poor fidelity that works against the medium's assumed naturalism, the videos at times look more like cartoons than like cinema verité.

Benning became increasingly adept at manipulating the mechanics of Pixelvision; for example, she converted the camera to enable it to run on batteries for outdoor use. Even before she could travel outside with her camera, however, she was already charting boundaries between "interior" and "exterior" through the language of the closet. Beginning in 1990, Benning turned to the subject of coming out, with its attendant thrills and isolations. "I found I was queer as can be," she announces with relish in a video made that year, *Jollies*. Perhaps, in contrast to "straight" video, the alternative format of Pixelvision gave special embodiment to queerness. Narratively, Benning's diaristic recordings made the "private" public; formally, their flattened surfaces convey a level of anonymity despite magnifying individual details. In this regard, the Pixelvision camera's reduced-information look has not lost its relevance. To be sure, in the YouTube era, bedroom confessions about the intricacies of identity are hardly rare, and so Benning's early works, connecting the small-scale, dreamy qualities of Pixel to the subtleties of sexuality, ironically feel even more immediate now than they did years ago.

This interface between aesthetic and psychological flatness is addressed in a 1998 work (shot on both video and film) tellingly titled *Flat Is Beautiful*, in which Benning follows Taylor, a preadolescent tomboy, as she drifts through life. The characters in *Flat Is Beautiful* wear oversize cardboard masks, as if to literalize the manner in which Benning's previous all-Pixel videos distorted facial features to the point of caricature. The video's flatness does not end at the masks—it extends to its emotional tenor. Though there is an expressive complexity in the tender way Taylor haltingly admits her same-sex desire, this works in tension with the masks' inscrutable stasis.

But the masks do more than underscore the characters' shut-down feelings; they also diagnose a wider cultural mood. "Flat affect"—a failure to register emotions, also known as "constricted" or "blunted" affect—is a sign of psychiatric disorder. It is a descriptor that could be extended from the individual to a shared, even national, response to the enforced escalation of public sentiment signaled by a war on "terror," and it is a symptom that crops up again in the initial scenes of *Play Pause*, with its depictions of mall displays that urge consumers to "get in on the revolution," as if shopping could defuse the rage or grief that might otherwise be channeled into political action. But there are nuances to Benning's "flatness"; this view of a world of blunted affect is not totalizing, as her work's limited dimensionality actually heightens her portrayal of subjectivity. Her sharply drawn protagonists struggle against and stand in contrast to the flatness around them—most pointedly in her series of videos "The Judy Spots," 1995, in which a 3-D papier-mâché figure who cries large, fat tears wanders among a crowd of 2-D drawings.

Consider, too, the series of monumental, vibrantly colored paintings Benning has been working on for the past eight years, which will be on view for the first time in "Suspended Animation." Benning calls them "heads," the same designation Chuck Close has given his works. Unlike the subjects of Close's portraits, Benning's figures are invented, and their fantastic attributes, such as bright blue lips or wildly dotted hair, are at once simplified and exaggerated. Painted with opaque, powdery Flashe paint, the heads fill huge unstretched canvases and unevenly cut pieces of industrial-use paper. With their stylized rendering and intense, nonreferential colors inside heavy outlines, the paintings look like a cross between Matisse circa 1909 and a kid's coloring book.

Benning has always drawn, and her move to a bigger studio in 1996 facilitated picture making on a monumental scale. The heads—some eight feet tall—cover the walls from floor to ceiling in her Chicago work space. As Helen Molesworth points out, Benning herself has called the figures "imaginary friends." Although most of them smile, not all of these friends are happy. In *Untitled*, made on September 12, 2001, the face is colored brown and sickly yellow. Three teal tears slide out of heavy-lidded eyes. Benning initially drew the twin towers in the pupils like a ghostly reflection—they have since been painted over, but the sense of mourning remains. Much of her work since September 11 has confronted the problems of representing collective melancholy and social disconnection. And, like the "flat daddies," her heads partake in the logic of substitution and functional replacement; they, too, are potent placeholders of loss and desire.

This idea of a fabricated surrogate—a displaced witness to feeling—casts a slightly different light on the flatness in *Play Pause*. Benning initially conceived the video as a series of sex drawings, which were slowly swallowed up by the urban landscape; those polymorphous scenes, however, remain the video's vital center. This sexual "play" activates the video, jarring it from the "paused" waiting and in-between-ness in evidence elsewhere. *Play Pause*'s constricted affect of urban ennui loosens up only when Irma Thomas, singing of longing, comes on the jukebox at the gay bar and the patrons start their kinky coupling. Benning interrupts the isolation and hollowness of her cityscapes with something erotic and alive, and, in so doing, moves from the merely flat toward the *graphic*, in both senses of the word. The ending of *Play Pause* features two people buttfucking on the wing of an airplane as it sets sail—an absurd unreality buoyed by whimsy.

Is it possible that this graphic, or explicit, flatness also carries the capacity for critique? As much as they traffic in absurdity, political cartoons and underground comics have a long tradition as a unique forum for truth-telling. In a time of manufactured reality and Photoshop fictions, the ultraflat medium of cartoons, with its brute juxtapositions and simplifications, paradoxically feels more honest: Think of David Rees's comic *Get Your War On* or the graphic novels of Joe Sacco or Marjane Satrapi. In fact, the use of sequenced still shots in *Play Pause* puts the work in conversation with the comic strip.

As she moves toward "pure" animation and away from the exclusive use of Pixelvision (itself a kind of quasi-animation), Benning, like these political cartoonists, comes closer to articulating a fully fleshed-out world. Her queer flatness is capable of holding on to affect instead of deflecting it. This graphic flatness resists the drive to sameness and the relentless leveling of difference, positing instead an openness to all forms of otherness. "Flat is beautiful," Benning proclaimed in 1998. Her recent work redraws the term to demonstrate that flatness is not only beautiful but also perverse and political. □

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