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In Analia Saban's Unassuming Artwork, More Than Meets the Eye



Slide Show | In Analia Saban's Unassuming Artwork, More than Meets the Eye The Argentine artist, whose work has drawn support from John Baldessari and Paul McCarthy, has two concurrent upcoming exhibitions in London and New York.

By JULIE BAUMGARDNER
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Her works may be beige, but Analia Saban's practice is anything but boring. The Argentinean-born artist, who at 34 has studios in both Santa Monica, Calif., and Hell's Kitchen, New York City, is destined for art historical legacy — if her mentors have anything to do with it. "John Baldessari is my main adviser," she shares, in a chat on the eve of her first London exhibition, "Interiors," with her long-time gallery Sprüth Magers, which opens Feb. 27. She also concurrently has a solo showing — her second — at Tanya Bonakdar in Chelsea, New York. Both

shows feature her signature playful approach to art-making, which slips between genres and subverts traditional usage of materials. “When people start calling me a painter, this is the moment I need to shift. I like to think about where I am showing, I make the work for the space,” she says. “It’s really about experiencing the world and analyzing my own interpretation of what I am experiencing.”

Saban, who, like many Argentines growing up in Buenos Aires, hails from intellectual European heritage, always sort of knew that she wanted to be an artist. “This is what I was born to do,” she says. She also shares an affinity, like many of her fellow countrymen, for psychoanalysis, which she calls “a big influence on me.” (Argentina has more shrinks per capita than any other country.) But analyzing her dreams isn’t what led to her UCLA, where she got her MFA. “Paul McCarthy chose my work — well, accepted me into the school,” she explains. “These guys keep me grounded!” The theory-heavy California conceptualism for which the institution is known certainly is embedded deeply within Saban’s work — making her a prime candidate for professorship at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, where she’s been an adjunct since October. At first, her arrival at the rigorous Teutonic conservatory gave rise to culture shock: “There was no internet! I was taken aback by it, I was really almost upset,” she exclaims. But eventually, she began to welcome the effects of unplugging. “The students were so present. I came to appreciate that most.” Her pupils even flew over for her Bonakdar opening with the prize money they won for their end-of-semester show.

That sense of focus and drive is readily apparent in Saban, who has popped up in the last four years or so as an art darling — though she’s a more serious artist than the term suggests, and a more modest one. “I feel understood by the viewer,” she says. “I’m just trying to contribute to this really long line of art history — there was a lot before me and will be a lot after me.” Saban’s works are rather challenging, in part because their visual elements can be glossed over as bland. Take, for example, “Claim (From Chesterfield Sofa),” on view in the Sprüth Magers show and described by the gallery’s press release thus: “Appears at first glance like two objects — a sofa, and the painting above it in matching neutral colors.” As it turns out, the sofa and the (canvas) stretcher are actually a singular unit — a modern-day conceptual construction of trompe l’oeil.

However, Saban’s most interesting investigations in this show are her “Markings (From Paint Storage)” series, which also may not look like much, but entailed inventing an entirely new artistic process. “I’m lifting the emulsion from the photograph and using that to paint,” she explains. “I’m painting with a photograph. Why not?” What results are a left-to-right comparison of the original photograph (of a shelf or sample palette of paints) and the reapplication of those captured pigments (which look like smears). That’s not to say Saban’s works are unappealing to look at; two of the series in the show are especially aesthetically arresting. “Fade Out (Bouquet of Flowers)” is Saban’s experiment with a simple, elegant image of a daisy bunch; over a series of 10 images, she thickens the drawing lines so that by the last print, the flower is nearly imperceptible. “Young

people really get these works,” she says, pointing out that the process shares similarities with what can be accomplished in programs like Adobe Photoshop. “Everyone has been saying my work is so much more interesting when you see it in real life. That’s the point,” she says, concluding sheepishly: “It’s worth your trip or something!”

“Analia Saban: Backyard” is on view through March 21 at Tanya Bonakdar, New York, tanyabonakdar.com; “Interiors” will be on view from Feb. 27 through March 28 at Sprüth Magers, London, spruethmagers.com.