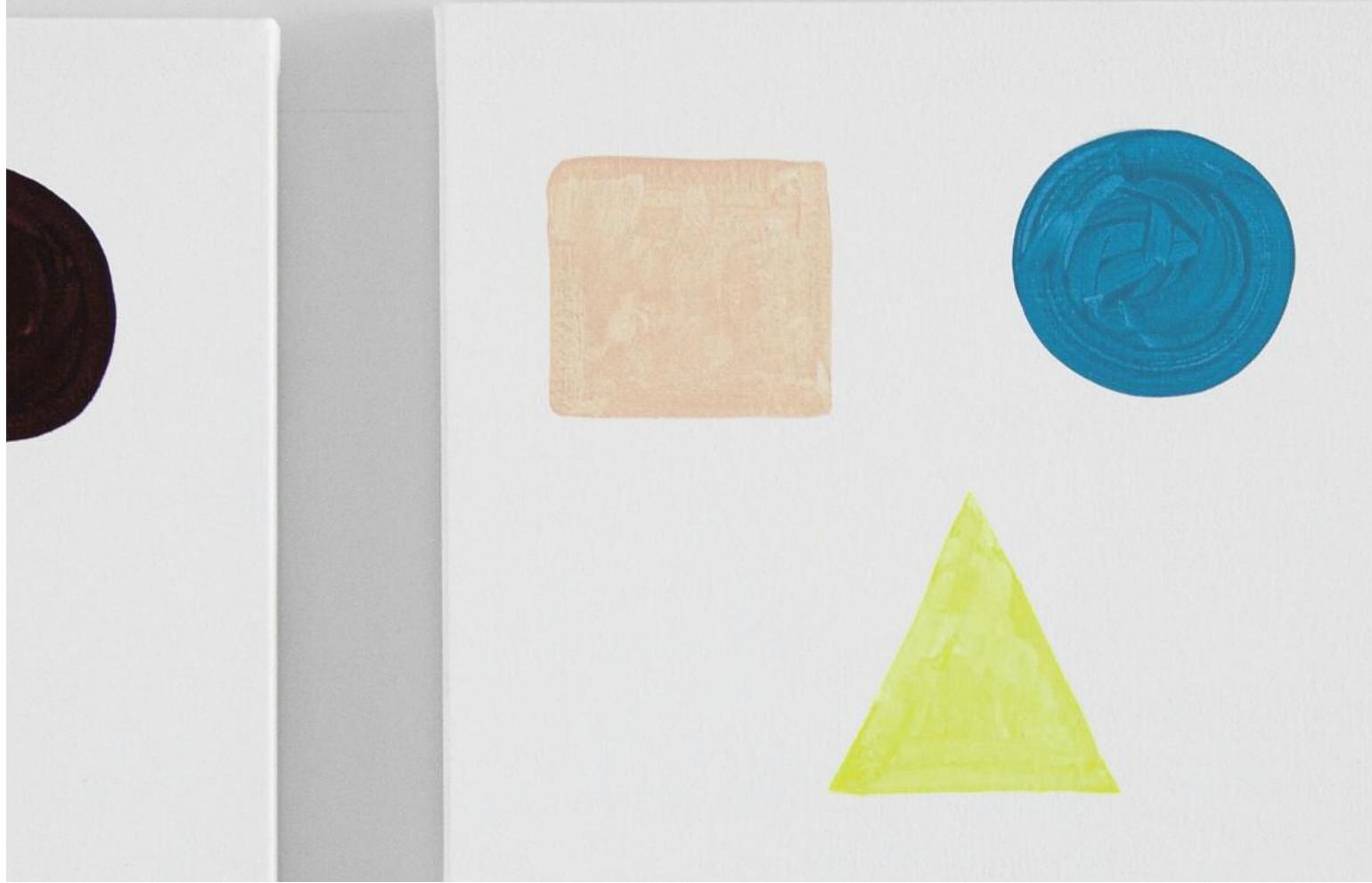


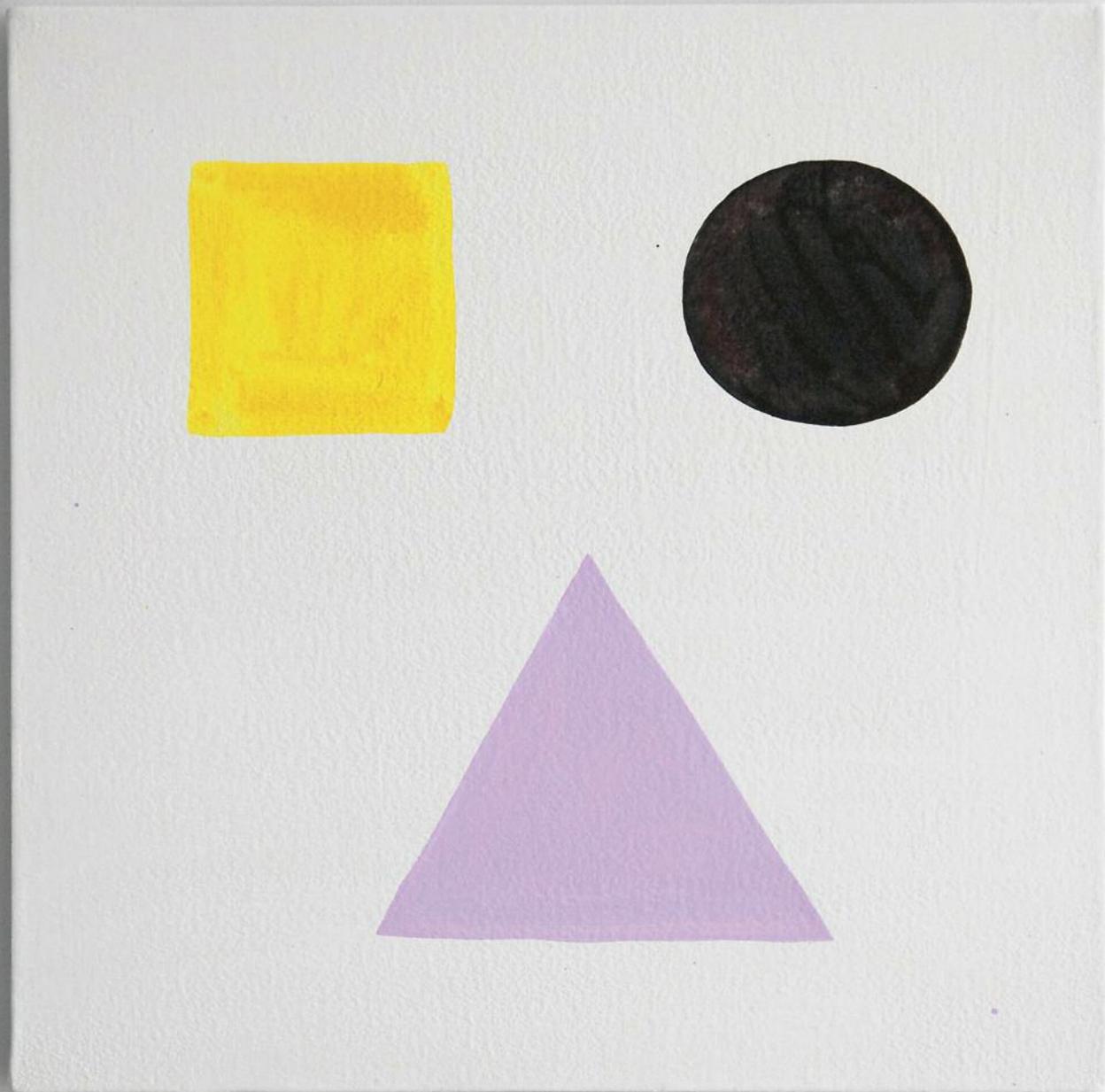
Pamela Fraser
Character Development



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Gahlberg Gallery
College of DuPage
425 Fawell Blvd.
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**It has nothing to do with belief ...
it has to do with understanding, and then changing.**

References come to your mind as fast as ideas and when you start to analyze your idea, because you're obviously connected to it, you start to analyze it not because you want to be conceptual or intellectual, necessarily, especially not in a domain like fashion, but because you want to see if it might make sense or not.

– Stefano Pilati ¹

Stefano Pilati is the brilliant Italian head designer for Yves Saint Laurent, known for distinct designs that surprise in their combinations of fabrics and cuts, designs criticized for being too romantic, or shapely, or what-have-you; looks that become the look shortly after when finally adopted by other ready-to-wear design houses. Formally, his clothes are often reported as grounded in inventive combinations of historical forms, or in flaunting irreverence to the expected uses for fabrics, and it is from this position that there is intelligence in Pilati's care to recognize that references are inescapable, while maintaining that this does not mean the references need be decoded for meaning or theoretical drive. So, no worry here over the motives of Pamela Fraser's paintings, or where the paintings have a home. If looking for the tradition and/or the historical precedence, this direction misses any point. Keep in mind Pilati's sentiment. Do these paintings make sense? In pause, resist thinking some conceptual references will help decode the paintings. Stop looking over your shoulder. Look ahead and give only passing time to note that someone else said everything intelligent in this essay. Me? I only looked with new reason to some lingering problems. Let "references come to your mind as fast as ideas." Delay a conceptual or intellectual analysis of Fraser's paintings as a way of insisting the paintings should not be read according to the usual discussion points held with abstract paintings: the sublime, the earnest and authentic, concrete facture, exhaustion, ad infinitum. In fact, perhaps Fraser's paintings cannot be read. Which is not to say they are anti-intellectual, this will return, later and with time.

"I like to stare at things that cannot be read. Only in that way can the present be remembered."²

There is another way of sharing the above sentiment; a telling that addresses one necessity for remembering the present. In a passage from Marcel Proust's novel, *Swann's Way*, the narrator recounts following a woman in a church:

I felt it was important that she not leave before I had looked at her enough, because I remembered that for years now I had considered the sight of her eminently desirable, and I did not detach my eyes from her, as if each gaze could physically carry away, and put in reserve inside me, the memory of that prominent nose, those red cheeks, all the particular details that seemed to me so many precious, authentic, and singular pieces of information about her face.³

So, yes, let's stare. Presently. One of the most difficult things asked of the viewer of an abstract or nonobjective painting is to give yourself over to sight. Make yourself a time being: take time. How to get into an exhibition and, not so simply, alight? Amble in possession. It is helpful to remind yourself that you are not the only thing in the room — these other things may be sculptures, photographs, people or, as in this case, paintings — whatever is in the room, you should try to be together. In this, consider a radically repurposed statement from French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, "'Together' means simultaneity, 'at the same time.' Being together is being at the same time (and in the same place, which is itself the determination of 'time' as 'contemporary time')." Without the experience of simultaneity time slips out of joint and the results can be dire. We cannot be together, cannot get together, feel together; there is no possibility of being in the same time in the same place. The contemporary of time loses its determining location and its possibility to affect relations; we lose togetherness with others.

Now, here, can I be together with a painting in Nancy's sense? That is quite the question. I do know Nancy has written quite extensively about the various arts, including a number of forays into investigations of painting and music that develop an understanding of how the experience of an artwork's medium affects the experience of being in time. Still, the "being" he is after in *Being Singular Plural* and other books is between individuals, individuals learning to recognize the plural that is required to think socially, or really, to think and have a singular identity at all relative the world. Nancy stresses the importance of acknowledging the togetherness often overlooked as we mistakenly think statements of individuality do not implicitly denote a relation between individuals. Keeping this in mind gives me a little breathing room when it comes to misappropriating Nancy's ideas in the service of spending time with Fraser's paintings, seeing canvases together, next to one another, outnumbering me, aware of myself with the paintings and opening space for comparison in place. "What makes one pairing work?" Fraser asked during one studio visit, I could not answer then and can only add now, what makes any one pairing work? Clearly asking this of not just two canvases, not just of the grouping, but of the shapes and the distinctions within any one painting, and this question needs also to be presented to the paintings and to me and to one another. In observing the paintings and being together with them, thoughts moving from canvas to canvas, eyes voraciously jumping from canvas to shape to shape to color to color, I must be open to changing views, noticing, open to familiarity and new surprise, prepared for unanticipated pleasure and qualms. The paintings subjectively begin to make sense how? A sufficient answer to convince anyone else will never be factually grounded within any one painting. What is important is that my asking this question places the relationship of the paintings and myself in an active space of contemporaneity: we remain at the same place and in the same time. Engaged in time I try to find terms I hope bring you with an understanding of my relationship to the paintings.

And now some facts about these paintings. The paintings of Fraser's in this exhibition, all titled *Shapes*, followed by a number in parenthesis indicating order, are not severe but are reductive. White background, one square, one circle, one triangle. Within the simple, consistent, forced and static composition there is range. Painted with a casual freehand, the shapes need some help to right themselves, each square, each circle,

each triangle has a defined form — larger, surer, more equal, lumpy, at ease, in the shakes — while still avoiding what might be described as shapely. The color of each square, each circle, each triangle, is to the side and not quite on point — off shade, slack hued, tampered down, cranked up, plastic, muddily cool, sparkly, tartly stringent, sprightly fluorescent, snugly mute — depending. The paint quality is surface thin, lacking much brush incident and little to no signs of reworking: just-so-paintings of just-right-enough relationships. Fraser said she aims to make the works in, about, "three minutes each," or failing this, for the paintings to look as such. And they do, even looking a touch timely. Sizes of the individual canvases vary not in any way to bestow importance to one scale or another, nor increased effort at any one scale or another. Equivalence in this series is achieved through dissimilarity and accumulation, always another almost like the last, except. Grouped in any number beyond three, the canvases form a noticeable, politely jumbled pack. Choosing entry into a grouping of these canvases is difficult as no one painting asks to be the threshold, even as the paintings themselves are amicable to persistent visitors.

The opportunity of and for space with Fraser's paintings is crucial. Again to think with Nancy, any encounter of togetherness changes any space. In fact, actually creates space. Knowing you are in relation to the paintings allows feelings of ridiculousness, humility, absurdity, pleasantness, and so many other possibilities. Desire, yours, is provided with room and makes time for an us to form. This many centuries down the path of painting we'll find no naturalized affinities in Fraser's paintings to trigger distinct emotional states or expressions of feelings, humans being most domesticated animals. Still, sensibilities act as filters when looking at the range between each square, each circle, each triangle, from canvas to canvas: this is why definitions, delineations and categories are always given an appeal when trying to make sense of paintings, or fashion or others for that matter. In this moment, it is useful to look backwards and recall Sei Shonagon and her *Pillow Book* from approximately 965. She is always attentive to recording the splendid as she recounts experiences with trivialities, landscapes, lovers and court politics. Shonagon peppers her diary of life in court during Japan's Heian period with lists categorizing the world around her as, for example: "Things That Gain by Being Painted," "Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster," "Things That Arouse a Fond Memory of the Past," "Things That Cannot Be Compared," "Things That Give a Hot Feeling," "Features That I Particularly Like," "Things That are Near Though Far," etc. The lists unfurl in distinct and exact sentences of deliberate description and impression. To recall, again, Nancy, by his definition togetherness does not need to be positive in relations. Too, Shonagon has lists for when desire is not fulfilled in togetherness: "Hateful Things," "Things That Give a Pathetic Impression," "Awkward Things," "Unsuitable Things," "Presumptuous Things," "Surprising and Distressing Things," "Things That Lose by Being Painted," etc.⁵ The result is a style of classification not made from independently verifiable facts. Shonagon's lists record togetherness and simultaneity and are only loosely taxonomic. She records relations exactly and succinctly largely without metaphor, a concrete recounting that also keeps editorializing at a minimum, so I will never know why, for Shonagon, "The expression of a woman plucking her eyebrows" is one of two "Things That Give a Pathetic Impression."⁶



Turn forward and look again at Fraser's paintings. The similarities between each square, each circle, each triangle, allow me to prepare descriptives of my own: unassuming, goofy, administered, light, lopping, provisional, smushed Froebel gift, and so on. In the same time and in the same place as the paintings I remain unfinished with warmth, buoyancy and a certain frivolity, the plasticity of the color and the blankness of paintings like these ask to be aimless and unconcerned with use or outcome. They just are, a kind of extravagance of time to each square, each circle, each triangle. Impressions and references come to mind "as fast as ideas," because I'm "obviously connected." Will a clear historical record determine whether any of these paintings "make sense or not"? No. Tell me if each square, each circle, each triangle can be counted among "Things That Gain by Being Painted." Do not answer; I want to continue in affinity. I want you here too.

None of this means that writers on art should spend their time wringing their hands over painting's ineffability; but they should think about why some visual configurations are harder to put into words than others. And about whether there is an ethical, or even political, point to that elusiveness — whether we'd be better calling it resistance than elusiveness.⁷

Resistance for what purpose exactly? For one, to counter judgments that pretend time was not spent with the paintings in question. For another, to counter judgments made without stopping to enter that moment of simultaneity, in the same time of "being together." A warning: "being together" with a painting is distinctly different from what is commonly referred to as "getting lost" in a painting. In this togetherness you do not give yourself over to the canvas, forget yourself in the paint and lose some identity. You are aware of yourself, your thoughts, and the painting, only together. For example, even as I try to ignore historical references,

Above: *Arrangement with Shapes (4, 7, 6, 5, 2, 10, 3, 9), 2010, acrylic and acrylic gouache on canvas*

I cannot help but have fleeting thoughts of Warhol's first 32 *Campbell's Soup Cans* exhibited in 1962. The first *Campbell's Soup Cans* were rudimentarily hand-painted on a white background by Warhol at a modest scale, one can per canvas, as opposed to his later and larger silk-screened versions. Almost like portraits. The canvases were also shown in a single row. One more warning: "being together" with a painting does not happen all at once in an instant. Looking at Fraser's canvases in a group and in a row, thoughts of the first 32 *Campbell's Soup Cans* return again and again, canvas by canvas, and I try to push aside the Warhols to look anew, after each passing memory of the *Campbell's Soup Cans*, to each square, each circle, each triangle by Fraser. This togetherness fixes where I am, and Fraser's paintings become a pause of resistance asking sensibility of me. A resistance that is ambiguous in that no outcome can be discerned in the desire to make a space for looking, and the resistance is no less determined for this lack of a clear directive. Poet Tan Lin: "Our most beautiful desires are our most unspecific ones."⁸ He should know. His newest book, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*, is highly formal and playful, contradictory and infuriating, didactic and ironic, tender and messy, and extremely well done. I cannot stop thinking with this book, returning to passages, finding multiple sections that argue completely opposing positions from each other, and passages that say something, nothing, or anything, depending on the day I read. Do I love *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking*? All I can answer is my desire has me unable to put the book down. This book makes a kind of sense. Returning to lines, to parse again and again, in

tandem and not always pleasantly. This desire is most beautiful in the refusal of a point, a goal, a clear message, having drive and a return to stay with the surface and to come together even when meaning is not working out. "Repetition is the only thing that makes something more perfect than it already is. For this reason there is always a gaze that does not reach inside the face (I was looking at)."⁹

Remember that face? Stay for a moment. Returning to surface. Look at Fraser's paintings. A face? Yes, like faces, these paintings. Not just because Fraser's paintings resemble driver's license photos of rudimentary cartoon robots. These canvases in line-up could be seen as a collection of distinct identities, and also could be seen rather as recordings of variances from just one set of features: one square, one circle, one triangle, by calling to mind one face. Relative these paintings: two eyes, one mouth and obscured nose. Or possibly two eyes, one well-defined nose, one pursed, hidden mouth. Whatever, look at one face you enjoy. A face on which to spend time, a face that is, that demands nothing: a face simultaneously. There is a value and a reason to stay with the surface of this face, to maintain "a gaze that does not reach inside the face." For what do you spend time with the surface of one face? Notice the surface variances, the face is not expected to explain every flicker and every reflection. Responsive is not the same as responding. Try to be arbitrary yourself. When arbitrary "at the same time," my eye glimpses — a delicate curve, a foaming glimmer, a soft corner, a welcoming heft to support, a quick swoop to follow, an acute angle inviting a trace, a blankness that opens to acceptance, a beaming white, a permeable overtone of green (or at least a not-blue), a blushing warmth — and I record presentness. Looking as a continually revised recording of anything notable and variable in the one face. Attentiveness. Thirst. Linger with one face, and a resistance against any excuse to be "conceptual or intellectual" or ineffable or elusive with this one face develops. This face does not answer questions of intention, stand in historical perspective for interpretation, enunciate references to emotion. The face unpredictably resists only in togetherness, resists blurring in this togetherness, this face makes sense or not between memorized details that do not quite follow one path. Someone else said, "Excitement is the only thing in the world that cannot be predicted."¹⁰ Steal a sidelong glance before returning to stare. Feel and want, hunt iridescence. Tan Lin, one last time:

I don't know exactly what I was waiting for while I was growing up and reading and re-reading that book and not cooking much, but I know I was waiting for something, and whenever I look at a painting (I am a very good cook) or write a poem (I am a pretty good poet), it is hard for me not to remember the *Theory and Practice of Good Cooking* and what James Beard said about how you should touch a steak with your hand in order to tell if it is done and that the color of food was the best way to taste it in advance. When I write a poem I often think of the hand that touches a steak to tell if it is done.¹¹

Color, when attuned in togetherness, bristles. Can. Darting. Might. Searching. Will. Reaching. Have. Consuming. In advance tasting a trace reflectivity. Here is developed the intelligence of a wanton touch formed while in this together — distaste, familiarity, comfort, refusal, maybe infatuation and romance are always possibilities of being when in the same time and in the same place. Drives return and return and return. Even when, truth

told, the contact in pursuit of a taste is not always a positive. The steak is not always done when we are hungry. The steak is not always cooked to our tastes when done. It is that the look returns, the anticipating touch is patient and feels one more time, to be with is to keep at bay conceptual and intellectual analysis and to admit the words might need to be rethought and articulated differently. A rebuke to disinterestedness that holds a bold connection — even in displeasure — more pointed than any conceptual criticism historically fixed can attain; a connection that considers why some configurations are harder to put into words than others. I cannot really explain this even as I know it makes sense unless you happen to be with me. If with me, we might now be able to together recognize "Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster," "Things That Cannot Be Compared," "Things That are Near Though Far," and many other things, besides. In remembering, we might not reach similar reasons in the descriptives we use to recount. "But perhaps it is not an accident that language does not easily lend itself to showing the "with" as such, for it is itself the address and not what must be addressed."¹²

– Anthony Elms

Anthony Elms is an artist and writer. He is also the editor of *WhiteWalls* and the assistant director of Gallery 400 at University of Illinois, Chicago.

The essay title is a quote by Roberto Bolano, 2226, New York: Picador, 2004, 716.

¹ Merlin Carpenter, "Fashion is Fun: An interview with Stefano Pilati by Merlin Carpenter," *Texte zur Kunst Vol. 20 No. 78, 2010, 116.*

² Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010, 87.*

³ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way, translated by Lydia Davis, New York: Penguin Classics, 2002, 180.*

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural, translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne, California: Stanford University Press, 2000, 60.*

⁵ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, translated and edited by Ivan Morris, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid, 99.*

⁷ T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, 187.*

⁸ Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking, 85.*

⁹ *Ibid, 32.*

¹⁰ *Ibid, 32.*

¹¹ *Ibid, 112.*

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural, xvi*

Pamela Fraser was born 1965 in Smyrna, TN. She currently lives and works in Chicago. In 1988, she received her B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York and in 1992 earned her M.F.A. at the University of California, Los Angeles. Solo shows include: Golden, Chicago (2010); 1K Projectspace, Amsterdam (2010); four exhibitions at Casey Kaplan, New York (1996, 1998, 2000, and 2007); and two at Galerie Schmidt Maczollek, Cologne (2005 and 2010). Recent group shows include: *Pairings: Pamela Fraser, David Wilson*, Downtown Gallery, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, *Power to the People*, Feature, New York, *Don't Piss on Me and Tell Me it's Raining*, Apex Art, New York, *That Object of Nostalgia*, Averill & Bernard Leviton A + D Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago, and *New Icon*, Loyola University Museum of the Arts, Chicago. Fraser is an assistant professor in studio arts at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Front cover: *Arrangement with Shapes (10, 3)*, 2010, acrylic and acrylic gouache on canvas

Inside front cover: *Shapes (1)*, 2010, acrylic and acrylic gouache on canvas

Inside back cover: *Shapes (8)*, 2010, acrylic and acrylic gouache on canvas

Back cover: *Chuck E. Cheese*, 2008, found photograph

All photos by Charlie Deets

Pamela Fraser

Character Development

Jan. 20 to Feb. 26, 2011

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the artist, Pamela Fraser, and the writer, Anthony Elms, for their creative vision on this publication and exhibition.

Barbara Wiesen

Director and Curator

Gahlberg Gallery



This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by the National Endowment for the Arts.

MAC-10-3544(1/11)1M

