

## Daisy May Sheff at Ratio 3 (January 13 - March 12, 2022)

by Erik Bakke

Daisy May Sheff has thirty-two paintings on display at Ratio 3 in San Francisco. At first glance, the small to modestly large, colorful works on wood and canvas appear like welcome and not so subtle bouquets punctuating the whiteness. But extended viewing does not bring confirmation of the familiar. These paintings do not offer traditional or comforting harmonies. Figurative elements are present, but mostly the paintings are horror vacui abstractions adhering to their own logic. The viewer might even feel claustrophobic—there is no view out onto a calm sea or a misty mountain on which the eye can rest; there is no emphasis on subtle transitions of hue to tickle one’s sensibility; there are no deft passages of drawing to charm or even mollify. Her garden is her own. And like the greater world, like nature, it contains teeth and blood.

The titular painting of the exhibition, “Hid It Well in a Walnut Shell,” 2021, exemplifies Sheff’s approach. Kelly green, yellow green, lemon yellow, pale yellow, hot pink, black, and a further variety of reds, pinks, oranges, blues, and lavenders both create form and complicate it. Texture is important but does not dominate. Gravity operates in the works’ narratives. Shapes, objects, animals, and people are pulled downward towards the bottom edge of the painting. The sky is less present. The patchy light suggested by the juxtaposition of hues creates the space of a cloistered arbor or of an airless interior room or suggests the closeness of a post apocalyptic sky relieved of its blue. In her construction of a space largely filled with abstract form, Sheff (in a manner less overt than an artist like Carol Bove who also challenges and continues aesthetic discussions from decades past) reopens up territory like that explored by Hans Hoffman in his color plane abstractions, and Sheff shows a way out of what today can read in Hoffman’s painting as dead end, mannered formalism (thank you, Mike Kelley, see his “Abuse Report,” 1995). The committed viewer of Sheff’s work will come to the realization that the painter is more comfortable embracing dogs than dogma—Sheff gives the impression of following lines of thinking that may peter out, that may not lead to a coda,

and that may give birth to new lines of thinking in the same work. She leaves space in her paintings for contradictions, unknowns, and future suppositions.

The figurative elements in Sheff's "Hid it Well in a Walnut Shell," 2021 include a centrally seated woman flanked by dogs. The dog on the left, with pronounced triangular eyes or glasses, has a head that looks a bit like a man's—both Elton John and Dick Cheney come to mind. The woman sits as if on a throne. To the right of the figure is a green purse. To the left, a pink, beige, brown, and red purse. The purses float like the angel of an annunciation. The top portion of the painting, about five inches worth, is a dirty pink section above a rough seam—Sheff takes advantage of the stitched together portions of canvas and accentuates the texture by adding small patches of canvas material. In looking at the paintings as a whole, the eye jumps from blocks of color to dots and circles to flowers to lines to figures and patterns. Colors and shapes capture and lead the eye hither, thither, and yon, and the viewer may find herself focusing on a single hue or value to help in deconstructing the work: the woman's upper body is clothed in black; the dog to the right of her figure has a black body; bold black forms occupy the work's lower left corner. Coming in from the right is a dark shape that looks like the covered tunnel of a deplaning walkway. Inside it one sees a mini abstraction that looks somewhat like the dramatic depictions of space on a sci-fi book cover. There is silver spray paint in this section which appears in other portions of the painting—perhaps it is part of an original ground for the work. Part of the woman's dress in the lower half is a hotter pink than the pink at the painting's top; the bottom part of the dress has some similarities to the abstract arrangement of lines in the deplaning tunnel. Overall, the viewer understands that the figures are less occupants of a space than they are survivors of Sheff's painting process.

The space where the seated woman's left eye would be (they eye to the right for the viewer) is occupied by another face (a face within a face—probably not a reference to the progressive thrash metal band Twelfth Gate's song, but its sonic mood seems about right for at least a selection on a playlist by which to view Sheff's work); the second face further de-emphasizes the figure as a portrait and reinforces the notion that the paint is

just paint and the figurative elements and abstract elements are part of the same conversation.

This conversation of the de-emphasis of the figurative elements and the emphasis on construct is also addressed in the smallest work of the show “Olive Girl,” 2021 and in the work “Damsel or Horse Fly,” 2021 “Olive Girl,” 2021 (4 3/4 x 3 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches) is painted on a piece of “L” shaped metal—folded edges and a kind of extended tab on the shorter part of the “L” suggest this is a found painting support, perhaps a small tray drawer. In the painting, there are some round forms painted with several colors. One of these is olive green and orange and has the look of a pimento filled olive. The “girl” of the painting is nothing more than a silhouette of a dress and a girl’s head with an exaggerated 60’s flip hairdo (think Marlo Thomas in “That Girl”). The girl is pink, not “olive,” and the textured pink shapes making up the girl are underpainting showing through a layer of light blue. The title not only misdirects, the viewer does not see an olive girl but an olive and a girl, but also makes clear that this painting is about forms and color and texture and material and not about the nouns of the title.

The work “Damsel or Horsefly,” 2021 continues this discussion. The “damsel” of this painting is a hairdo (think Sharon Tate in “Valley of the Dolls”) above a blank face with roughly painted heavy eyebrows and eyes and a dress pieced together with abstract shapes. Most of the painting is a complex network of rectangular and other shapes and dots and marks in colors ranging from, to name a few, dark blue to umbers, to cadmium yellows and reds to grass greens to orange yellow to washed out persimmon to white to turquoise to lavender to perhaps some alizarin crimson. Among the shapes are several heavily textured applications of black or very dark paint that could take on the look of the “horse fly” of the title. Sheff is clearly making the point that everything is paint—there is no damsel, there is no horsefly. There is paint and pareidolia.

On the other hand, as with “Olive Girl,” 2021 and “Damsel or Horsefly,” 2021, Sheff’s titles create associations and add complexity to any purely formalist readings of her work. Some titles reference elements within the paintings, and some clearly reference

sources outside the paintings. The title of the work “A Hundred Goodlie Ways of Avowing One’s Sweet Love to a Comlie Damozel,” 2021 brings the viewer to Roman Polanski’s “The Fearless Vampire Killers” of 1967, starring his future wife Sharon Tate. The text is from the title page of a book featured in the film. During the making of this film, Polanski and Tate began a relationship. Ratio 3’s press informs that Sheff got her BFA from UCLA. It is not a stretch, particularly given the 10-minute drive from UCLA to 10050 Cielo Drive, Beverly Hills where Charles Manson’s followers killed the pregnant Sharon Tate and others in 1969, to imagine that Sheff wants the viewer to consider Tate’s horrific fate. And once this history has been suggested, the viewer may start to make less substantiated associations. Manson and his followers were trying to pin their 1969 killings, including Tate’s, on the Black Panthers and start a “race war,” and so they included a panther “paw print” rendered in blood at the site of some murders. With this in mind, the work “Gentleman with Bird Mustache and Dusty Mouse Print Plate,” 2021 with, in the foreground of the painting, a circular element covered with bright red mouse footprints takes on sinister, and slightly comic, implications. Sheff’s processing of the evil of the world and her unbridled, yet labor intensive, approach to painting reminds of Edvard Munch’s attempts to put in paint, by working quickly and freely, the torment of the living mind.

Returning to a “A Hundred Goodlie Ways of Avowing One’s Sweet Love to a Comlie Damozel,” 2021, one sees that the painting features some figures that appear to have been mostly covered over with white paint. At least one hoof is visible—is the devil present? A woman in profile has a signature Sharon Tate hairdo. Xs appearing to be made of charm bracelets (“charm bracelet” is part of the title of another painting and one is present in at least one other painting) are presented in front of more abstract patterning at the top left and right corners of the painting—these might reference the Xs carved into the foreheads of the women (like Leslie Van Houten who was recommended for release by California’s Board of Parole Hearings at the end of 2021) who participated in the murders. On the right side of the painting are objects that are hard to define (part of the excitement of Sheff’s paintings), including a blue sphere-like object with a booklet in it, a green bean shaped object that may be a head with a patch or something else

and a shape that may be a face in profile and dark colored line and overpainting creating symbols. One detail appears to be on upside down candelabra or menorah (a candelabra shaped lamp is clearly visible in photographs of the murder scene at the LaBianca house where Manson's crew killed again following the Tate murders). Of course, all of this doesn't add up to the paintings themselves. In putting together works of great complexity, Sheff seems to be following an internally generated narrative; as a result, her works benefit from a lack of predictability and exhibit a cohesiveness that is refreshingly difficult to qualify.

Sheff's "Sir Woolley's Ram Caught in the Thicket," 2021 depicts a 4,500 year old ancient Mesopotamian object excavated by C. Leonard Woolley in the 1920s from The Great Death Pit at Ur. Sheff's possessive in the title reminds that Woolley invented the association of the work with the biblical story of Abraham in which god commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. As the story goes, just prior to Abraham's carrying out the sacrifice, god reveals a ram for Abraham to slaughter instead of his son. The Penn Museum, which has shown this ancient work of art, makes the point that this pre-Christian object more likely depicted a goat on its hind legs feeding from a tree, as they are supposedly wont to do in Iraq. This painting stands out for its almost sweet presentation of the depicted sculpture—the sculpture is set off against spare surroundings and the ram's electric blue horns are framed in white and resonate with a dioxazine purple background. The painting's open composition may let the viewer breathe for a moment, but the subject does not. Consideration of blood sacrifice returns along with discussions of colonial abuse and cultural theft and global warfare.

Mustached men in period dress appear in at least four of Sheff's paintings in this exhibition. The high collared jackets the men wear suggest military uniforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—John J. Pershing and Kaiser Wilhelm II come to mind. Whether or not the type of dress refers to specific individuals, it does point to a time in history when white, mustached men were making decisions that resulted in the deaths and subjugation of peoples inside and outside the national boundaries claimed by these decision makers. The thinking of this period has not died, and Sheff, with a bit of simple

drawing, keeps our mind on it and may even lead us to the doorway of considering the ways in which the 45th president has been associated with both Pershing and the Kaiser. Sheff's textual and pictorial references may strike some viewers as abstruse, but she seems willing to take on humanity in all its baseness and make paintings that are in themselves a victory for existing as something beyond glorifications and laments.

There is also much humor in Sheff's paintings. The work "No Flouncing!," 2019 might refer to a figure in the work who could be stitching some flounce or to, as dictionary.com explains, leaving "an online group in a dramatic manner." The internet reference seems reinforced by what appears to be the depiction of a flame in the work. Above all, the oil, pen, velvet, and fabric on wood work is a study in materials, form, and hue. The variety of materials Sheff uses in constructing her paintings should also be given full consideration. One might imagine all of Sheff's work painted monochrome white just so rough wood edges, appliqué, beads, collage, canvas seams, metal pieces, and heavily textured paint would become more obviously subject in themselves.

In keeping with the idea of painting as object, Sheff considers the fronts and the edges of her canvases. If you look at the edges, you may find her signature or a cartoon animal or some key to material or process. "Double Act," 2021 features black spray paint on the left edge and red paint on the right edge. The red on the right edge looks as though it is part of the underpainting of the red side of the front of the painting (a painting divided by a figure of a woman whose body runs almost the length of the painting top to bottom) and the black sprayed on the left side edge looks like it was added later in the process to provide balance and to match the dark left side of the front of the painting. Sheff makes moves like this with confidence and without fussiness. In this painting and others, a lesser painter would have cleaned up or covered the edges or overworked the solution.

In the play between title and work as object, Sheff does not shy from a wide range of popular and obscure references. The work "What a Dazzling Pair of Hoofs, Old Man!," 2021 is titled after a line in Mervyn Peake's work "The Illustrated Gormenghast Trilogy."

Peake is famed as an illustrator and a writer. The Trilogy is well known for being imaginative and odd; this might be part of Sheff's point.

Here is a bit of the text from which the title is taken:

'Is that you, Cutflower?' said another voice. 'I've been looking for you all morning. Bless my heart! what a fine polish on your shoes, Cutflower! I wondered what the devil those lights were! But seriously, I'm very embarrassed, Cutflower. Indeed I am. It's my wife in exile, you know – ragingly ill. But what can I do, spendthrift that I am, with my bar of chocolate once a week? You see how it is, my dear chap; it's the end: or almost: unless ... I half wondered – er – could you ...? Something until Tuesday ... Confidential, you know, ha ... ha ... ha ...! How one hates asking ... squalor, and so on ... But seriously, Cutflower (what a dazzling pair of hoofs, old man!) but seriously, if you could manage ...'

Like the fantastic trilogy of nearly 1000 pages, Sheff's paintings take you on a trip of indeterminate destination and take their time getting there. "What a Dazzling Pair of Hoofs, Old Man!," 2021 has a bit more pictorial space than other works. Figures and objects are not as pressed up upon the picture plane. There is a black table presented in perspective with one of the military-esque men with a mustache (well, a bird standing in for a mustache which is also a recurring motif in Sheff's painting) sitting at the table. The painting also contains elements seen in other paintings—look to the work "Cake Fish Treasure Chest," 2021 for another version of the cake fish treasure chest that appears in this painting, or look to the work "A Hundred Goodlie Ways of Avowing One's Sweet Love to a Comlie Damozel," 2021 for another depiction of a small book, like the one in "What a Dazzling Pair of Hoofs, Old Man!," 2021 held up by a silhouetted hand and arm.

"What a Dazzling Pair of Hoofs, Old Man!," 2021 includes the ascension of a woman (with Sharon Tate hair) surrounded by bright yellow light. And a snow globe with flames coming out from underneath it seems to be accompanying her. Could this be at once a reference to Titian's 1518 "Assumption of the Virgin" and also to the Fearless Vampire Killers Sharon Tate Bathtub Scene Snow Globes readily available online from a variety

of vendors (\$24.50 at one)? If nothing else, it is clear that Titian and Sheff both share a proclivity for painting on wood.

The historical condition of women in society is one of many subtexts in Sheff's paintings. Sharon Tate's fate can serve as an obvious parable—not only in her death but also in her relationship to Polanski. The director has come to be known as much for his rape of 13-year-old Samantha Geimer as for his films—Sheff is inclusive of Tate's relationship with her husband as part of her fate by having the ironic title “A Hundred Goodlie Ways of Avowing One's Sweet Love to a Comlie Damozel” lead the viewer to Tate through Polanski. Women are present in Sheff's paintings in this exhibition through renderings of figures but also with mention in works' titles of clothing most often associated with women. These paintings include “Cranberry Crinoline with Leg of Mutton Sleeves,” 2021; “Cherry dress and White Eye with Purse,” 2021; “Charm Bracelet (Asterisk Agnes),” 2021; “No Flouncing!,” 2019; “20 Minute Birthday Dress,” 2021; “Swirly Sleeves,” 2021; “Puff Sleeve Bow Dress,” 2021; and “Hot Briney Shallows (Leg of Mutton Sleeves),” 2021. Leg of Mutton sleeves have been around for centuries, and the association of the style's name with the notion of women as meat is hard to miss. Sheff may or may not have upped the ante by adding “Hot Briney Shallows” to the title of one of the works. A Google searcher trying to sniff out a source or reference for the three words in concert will receive the following linked messages: “Showing results for “Hot Britney Swallows” Search instead for “Hot Briney Shallows.”” If you haven't done the search yourself and haven't guessed or aren't otherwise in the know, Britney Swallows stars in X-rated film. In this one title, Sheff takes the viewer on a journey through the centuries of expectations of women in dress, in body, and in public and private performance. The painting itself presents a pinwheel type bouquet with a woman wearing a dress with leg of mutton sleeves. The figure appears pregnant (remember Sharon Tate) and there appears to be a reference to a fetus in her womb. She also sports the Sharon Tate hairdo. “Hot Briney Shallows (Leg of Mutton Sleeves),” 2021 puts Tate then as a floral offering in a bouquet. There is no need to review a list of the staple of floral metaphors for women, and there may or may not be a daisy in the bouquet. At the bottom of the painting is a plant in full flower and on the lower right a



yellow tri-mounded shape that might represent breasts and belly (this mostly abstracted shape in bright yellow and the colorful bouquet and other bright shapes are made more apparent by their contrasting with the dark blues and blacks of the background).

And, yes, Sharon Tate did wear a wedding dress (a mini) with leg of mutton sleeves when she and Polanski got married. Sheff points to how in Tate's short life, and while she was involved with Polanski, she was able to inhabit a range of some of the most popular roles available to women since the invention of the leg of mutton sleeves and long before: sex object, wife, mother, and victim. It might be a good moment to refresh ourselves with the 2003 Guerrilla Girls' book "Bitches, Bimbos, and Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes." Chapter Two offers "The Top Stereotypes from Cradle to Grave: Daddy's Girl, Tomboy, The Girl Next Door, Bimbo/Dumb Blonde, Femme Fatale/Vamp, Bitch/Ballbreaker, The Mother of All Stereotypes, Spinster/Old Maid, Hag/Crone." Only murder deprived Tate of embodying the complete list.

The upcoming 59th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale is entitled "The Milk of Dreams;" with respect to Sheff's project, there is something in the Biennale's curator Cecilia Alemani's exhibition statement that comes to mind:

Many contemporary artists are imagining a posthuman condition that challenges the modern Western vision of the human being—and especially the presumed universal ideal of the white, male "Man of Reason"—as fixed centre of the universe and measure of all things. In its place, artists propose new alliances between species, and worlds inhabited by porous, hybrid, manifold beings that are not unlike [Leonora] Carrington's extraordinary creatures. Under the increasingly invasive pressure of technology, the boundaries between bodies and objects have been utterly transformed, bringing about profound mutations that remap subjectivities, hierarchies, and anatomies.

Alemani's futurism and apparent optimism stand a bit at odds with the realities, hard and soft, offered up in Sheff's work, but in thinking of human society's next incarnations,

Sheff, in her depictions of military “gentlemen,” her discussions of women and violence, and her portrayals of animals, also deeply questions what has been and might be.

Of the thirty-two works in Sheff’s exhibition, at least nine prominently feature dogs. Most of the dogs are in seated position looking out of the painting. The one in “Sunny Nap (Leave Me Alone),” 2021 seems to be napping. The sharp edged hockey puck-like nose of this dog is consistently and wonderfully off putting. Many are accustomed to thinking of dogs as pets, as family members and—as corporate media campaigns remind us daily—in need of pampering. With Sheff’s inclination for historical reference, one is reminded that dogs and humans have been allies for over 14,000 years. If you were wondering, Sharon Tate had dogs.

By some accounts, it only takes 28 days for an abandoned dog to become feral. It is human behavior that stands between a dog one day lounging at its human companion’s feet and then a month later hunting as part of a pack. Alemani, in her text, might allow for a less violent future; the discussion of “new alliances between species, and worlds inhabited by porous, hybrid, manifold beings” suggests a future with more nuanced negotiations between beings. Sheff evokes the past to illuminate the present. Human interaction and cultural activity from ancient Mesopotamia to 20th century Los Angeles are foregrounded in the paintings of her exhibition at Ratio 3. In Sheff’s paintings and titles, violence is intertwined with culture and domestication even when allusions to it are comic or heading in the direction of camp. In mining banality and horror and in approaching painting as a product of personal imagination, Sheff paints less as an act of catharsis, or even hope, and more as an act of predation. Growth follows death. Sheff is running free with her teeth sunk deep into a hamstrung culture. Long may she roam.

February 14, 2022  
California

Images of all works in the exhibition can be found on the gallery’s website:  
<https://www.ratio3.org/exhibitions/daisy-may-sheff-hid-it-well-in-a-walnut-shell/works>