

Art & Culture

words Jesc Bunyard

MARK BARROW AND SARAH PARKE

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Mark Barrow and Sarah Parke are a husband and wife art force. In their home in Brooklyn, New York they create intricate textile based works. Sarah Parke creates the base layer for the work using a loom, which is installed in their living room. Barrow then produces a layer of paint on top of the fabric. The combination of paint and fabric produces a detailed layering of texture, line and colour. This combination and its perceptual result could only happen through the collaboration of Mark Barrow and Sarah Parke. Their practice is also informed by an interest in scientific and mathematical theories, creating not just an intensely visual artwork, but one that is underpinned by conceptual thinking.

I interviewed them both before their Autumn exhibition of The Arts Club to find out more about their practice.

I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE EXPANDING YOUR WORKING SPACE IN NEW YORK, BUT YOU USED TO HAVE YOUR LOOMS IN YOUR LIVING ROOM, NOT LEAVING MUCH SPACE FOR ANYTHING ELSE. YOU WERE SURROUNDED BY YOUR WORK, WHAT WAS THIS LIKE?

Sarah: We liked it because we were always working. At the time, we both had other jobs so it was important to be able to put time into our studio whenever we could.

Mark: When Sarah became pregnant with our son we combined our space with the flat below and we now live on that floor and the studio is upstairs.

LOOKING AT YOUR WORK, THERE ARE SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN YOUR PRACTICE AND AGNES MARTIN'S, NOT ONLY VISUALLY BUT ALSO WITHIN THE PROCESS. MARTIN'S PRACTICE, LIKE YOURS NOW, WAS INCREDIBLY TIME CONSUMING AND METICULOUS. HAS AGNES MARTIN'S WORK BEEN A CONSCIOUS INFLUENCE?

Mark: I first seriously looked at her work when I was in graduate school and there was an exhibition of her early NY paintings on view at Dia Beacon. I remember studying how the paintings functioned at various distances and looking closely at how the canvas grain broke up her penciled lines. I had the idea to make marks that *followed* the canvas grain and that was the beginning of the painting process I use today.





YOUR PRACTICE IS HEAVILY THEORETICAL, FOCUSING ON MATHEMATICS AND PSYCHOLOGY. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT SPECIFIC THEORIES YOU WORK WITH AND HOW THESE INFLUENCE YOUR PRACTICE?

Mark: I am fascinated with innovations in scientific fields. The world has existed for however many billions of years and functioned relatively in the same manner. Yet people are still coming up with new models for looking at it that give us a new understanding of how it works. I think this correlates with how we approach our practice. Painting, sculpture, or weaving are these old crafts, but if we can find a new way of looking at them, a new model, then maybe we can understand them in a different way.

Sarah: Yes, we are always looking for new ways to approach the practice.

Mark: And any given approach highlights certain aspects of the practice but hides others. That is what keeps it moving; there is no complete model. I wouldn't say I am interested in theory, per se, rather in coming up with an approach to the medium we are working in that helps us understand it in a new way.

YOU ALSO FOCUS ON CEZANNE'S MODEL OF PERCEPTION. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THIS THEORY IS AND HOW IT MANIFESTS ITSELF IN YOUR WORK?

Mark: I am interested in the philosopher, Merleau-Ponty's take on Cezanne. He describes how Cezanne makes the distinction between the "spontaneous organization of the things we perceive" and "the human organization of ideas and sciences". Cezanne leaned completely towards the former, trying to do away with any system of painting (such as perspective) and paint as he saw, his hand an extension of his eyes. In this way his work is antithetical to ours in that ours is grounded in various systems.

Sarah: But there are also elements of our work, like the handmade quality, that sort of undermine those systems. I would say I am a more intuitive artist, but I have to translate my ideas in a more systematic way because weaving has to be so planned out.





WHEN DID YOU FIRST START WORKING TOGETHER AND WHAT'S THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS LIKE?

Sarah: We started working together 6 years ago when I made a fabric for a painting that was part of Mark's first solo show in New York at White Columns. It turned out so well he asked if I would keep making fabrics for him. At first they were simple, natural colored, patterned fabrics. I would make the fabric and give it to Mark to paint on.

Mark: As the process has become more complicated, Sarah's creative role has grown. The practice has expanded to include a lot of different types of objects and there is a lot of back and forth dialogue because everything is so intertwined and each work leads to another. Even though there are some works we create independently from each other, everything is related.

WHAT WORK ARE YOU SHOWING AT THE ARTS CLUB?

Mark: We are showing paintings that make a connection between the loom's underlying mathematic logic and RGB and CMYK color models. For example, there is a painting on a red, green, and blue fabric that has only black paint on top to create different patterns of RGB threads to make the composition.

Sarah: I am also re-upholstering some of The Arts Club's furniture with my fabric and presenting a 3-panel, fabric folding-screen with a color gradation that plays on the idea of a 'screen' and digital color space.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

Mark: Around the same time as the Arts Club show, we are doing a project with Almine Rech Gallery in Paris that will include paintings, fabric, furniture, and a silk rug I designed.

Sarah: And later this year we will participate in Independent Projects with Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York.

Mark Barrow and Sarah Parke will be exhibiting at The Arts Club, London, from 29th September until January 2015.