

White Columns

Cay Bahnmilller

November 10 – December 17, 2022

Reception: Thursday, November 10, 2022, 6-8pm

White Columns is pleased to present the first New York exhibition of the work of Cay Bahnmilller (1955-2007). “Painting is inscription, rather than description,” Bahnmilller once wrote. Aptly, her own vast oeuvre saw the prolific painter inscribe upon materials ranging from discarded bits of wood, cardboard and plastic to found street signs and sandwich boards. Pithy, vivid and texturally dense, the ornery, often irreverent content of her work belies the gestural clarity of Bahnmilller’s technique.

A longtime fixture in Detroit’s “Cass Corridor” known as much for her art as for her affecting, if at times thorny, personality, Bahnmilller invoked the geography and architecture of the city in her expansive artistic practice. “There is nothing that interests me more probably than urban spaces and use,” Bahnmilller wrote in a letter to collector Gilbert Silverman.¹ This fixation can be seen in her inclusion of mundane, cast-off bits of the city in her work, an expression of architect Louis Kahn’s idea of “spent material,” as noted by Bahnmilller in her own writings.

Bahnmilller’s paintings came to perform an excavation that brought to the surface a fraught psyche. In the wake of a traumatic event, her work grew more insular, focusing on the psychological alongside the structural. These later works reflect the shift from Bahnmilller’s lifelong preoccupation with urban spaces to a more complex interpolation between notions of the public and the private, the exterior and the interior, the built and the natural. Fiercely protective of her home, Bahnmilller fashioned signage to hang in her yard emblazoned with phrases like “KEEP OUT YOU LITTLE MOTHERFUCKER” or “BEWARE OF THE DOG.” The wry *Untitled (Enjoy the raspberries, I/we lace them with arsenic)*, sardonically defies its purpose as a warning through its illegibility, while works like *Untitled (Warning)* are even less legible, such that the text serves as pure visual form, simultaneously inviting and repelling attempts to engage with the piece. These works function both as literal warnings to would-be intruders and as symbolic signposts demarcating the boundaries of the artist’s interior world.

¹ Via Loren, C. (2022). *Gilbert and Lila Silverman*. Three Fold. <https://threefoldpress.org/silverman>

A voracious reader, Bahnmitter noted that a text to which she returned often “[became] a painting.” Her many journals and books took on a palimpsest-like quality, with layers of scribbles and oil paint imbuing the original object with new aesthetic life. Sculptural works such as the *Ship of Death* series also contain myriad and complex literary allusions. Much like Bahnmitter’s own work, the D.H. Lawrence poem from which *Ship of Death*’s title is taken underscores the necessity of forming a protective sphere within a broader, bleaker world: “Oh build your ship of death, your little ark/ and furnish it with food, with little cakes, and wine/ for the dark flight down oblivion.” Bahnmitter’s iterative engagement with literary forms reemerges at the bottom of another piece in the *Ship of Death* series: the painted phrase “AKA THE CAT CAME BACK” is, in fact, a double-reference to a Ted Berrigan poem that makes mention of the Lawrence poem and nicknames it “a/k/a THE CAT CAME BACK.”²

Throughout her life, Bahnmitter returned to paintings from earlier years and added to them, often obscuring or altering their original content. The haptic and multilayered quality of her work collapses linear processes of making to create a space in which the painting is continually recreated. In her sprawling inscriptions upon both texts and materials can be seen the workings of a frenetic mind perpetually reaching to bridge the gap between thought and object. “The violated environment is a physical remainder reconstructed through many layers of perception, intense light and obscured, disfigured form,” she wrote. “Thus, the process of painting becomes the coverlet to experience.”

Cay Bahnmitter's exhibition has been developed in close collaboration with the Estate of Cay Bahnmitter and Daniel Sperry and Alivia Zivich of What Pipeline, Detroit.

Cay Bahnmitter (1955-2007) was born in Wayne, MI. After spending part of her childhood abroad in Argentina and Germany, she lived and worked in Detroit, MI until her death. Bahnmitter graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Michigan in 1976. In her lifetime, her work was shown at Feigenson Gallery and Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Detroit, and was collected by Gilbert and Lila Silverman. Her work is in the collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Since her passing her work has been shown at What Pipeline in Detroit. Her work has been written about in *Artforum* and *The New York Times*.

For further information, please contact info@whitecolumns.org

² The Berrigan poem was published by The Alternative Press, a Detroit poetry press run by Ken and Ann Mikolowski, close friends of Bahnmitter’s.