Bradley Ertaskiran

Julia Dault

Selected Press | Revue de presse

3550, rue Saint-Antoine Ouest
Montréal, QC H4C 1A9 Canada

T +1 514 989-1056
info@bradleyertaskiran.com

Julia Dault

This conversation between Julia Dault, who was in Toronto, and Daisy Desrosiers, who was in Chicago, took place via video chat in December 2020.

DAISY DESROSIERS: Let's jump right in. How would you describe what you do?

JULIA DAULT: [Laughing] There are so many ways of describing it. I mean, the simplest, most straightforward way is to say: I make paintings, works on paper, sculptures, and installations. To date, I've thought a lot about material reciprocity.

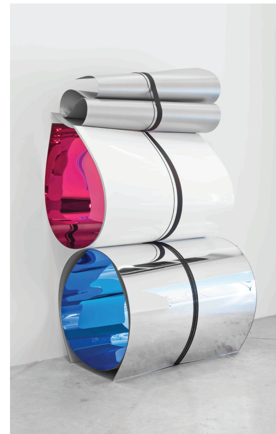
DD: Can you say more about this?

JD: It's a term I use to refer to a balance or equilibrium between material and maker. With my Plexiglas sculptures, I ask: what am I physically capable of doing as a maker? What intellectual proclivities do I have? What characteristics does the material have? I've always seen the sculptures as an exact meeting point between those two forces. The works capture action in form.

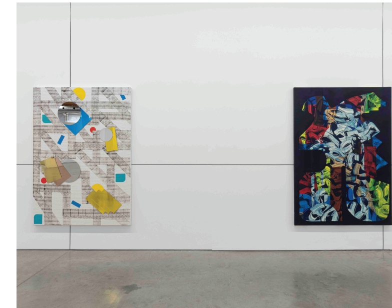
DD: I see.

JD: The ideas of interdependence, connectivity, and balance have always been part of my work. But they're mostly rooted in rules. So, for example, if a Plexiglas sculpture were to spring open during an exhibition, it would mean that the material would have "won," if you will. The material surpassed my physical capabilities. So the Plexiglas sheets would have to lie, splayed on the floor. I should add: this has never actually happened.

The equilibrium would be broken. I think a lot about material, balance, and access. How does a viewer find a way into the work?



Untitled 36, 1:00–4:15 PM, September 15, 2014.



View of *Days of Our Lives*, Bradley Ertaskiran Gallery, Montreal, 2020.

Thinking this way is informed by my background in art history and art criticism.

DD: That's interesting. Can you speak to how that background comes into your artwork?

JD: I used to write about art and sometimes found it hard to look at a work, read the press release, and discover that crucial information about the work was external to it. That was formative, for me, when I first began making art. How do you embed information into a piece and have it legible to someone who doesn't have the press release or some other explanation? What does it mean to have a self-sufficient work of art?

DD: Yeah, to offer a self-contained proposal.

JD: Exactly. I keep going back to that: self-sufficiency and transparency. When I paint, and these are small details that aren't instantly obvious, it's important to me that each layer is visible. Viewers should be able to see the process by which the work came into being, should they wish to.

And yet still be able to step back and see the whole. I'm interested in the mechanisms of sight and viewing, but also how we choose what we see – and all of this still within the realm of balance, interdependence, with material reciprocity. It's all at play. I can keep going if you want. [Laughing]

DD: I love hearing you talk. I recently experienced your work in Montreal, at Bradley Ertaskiran. So I'm reflecting on that encounter a bit as I listen to you.

JD: That's great that you saw the show.

DD: During my visit I told Megan Bradley how fascinating it is to witness your subtle play with materials, and how superposition allows for different layers of intimacy. As a viewer you are always surprised – or invited to be surprised – depending on how you position yourself in relation to the work. I also thought it created a compelling relationship with the space, which can be challenging. I thought you incorporated its characteristics elegantly.

JD: Thank you. I'm interested in a balance between the appearance of flatness – of surfaces – and depth. So I use layers to play with pictorial space. I think a lot about narrative, the meaning

unfolding as you move through space – the space of the painting, but also the space in which the paintings are seen. With my sculptures, I always think about sight lines and the order in which details are viewed, almost like a choreography of sight. When I make a show, I always intervene in the space in some fashion so it's not just a generic white box.

DD: How would you describe your relationship to Toronto?

JD: I was born and raised here. I was raised by an art teacher and art critic, who would have wild dinner parties on the weekends with tons of artists. It was a great way to understand what an art community could be.

DD: I can only imagine.

JD: On weekends, we would go out and see shows. It was a great education. But I decided to leave partly because I was raised within the city's art community. I was briefly an art critic here, for one of the national newspapers, and I was secretly making art. I just wanted to be an artist, and I thought, there are too many connections if I'm to begin my life as an artist here.

DD: Baggage.

JD: I knew I would always be seen through a filter, so I applied to grad schools in the States and ended up in New York. I just wanted to start over on my own.

DD: So, you have a deep relationship with the city and with a particular moment in the Toronto art world. Then, after about a decade away, you came back?

JD: That's right. We came back a week before Trump was elected in 2016. [Laughing] I had a small child and aging parents. They needed me; my mom needed me. I'm very happy to have done so. No offense to my American friends. [Laughs]

DD: None taken. I'm a Montrealer at heart and I come back as often as I can, with great joy.

JD: My husband's American, so we return often, and we have many friends back in New York. I've been getting to know the Toronto art world again. It's changed a lot, and it has been great to reconnect with old friends and also make some new ones.

DD: What comes to mind when I ask how the Toronto art community is different? Of course, you've changed, so there's that component. I'm curious because I'm also an outsider to Toronto.

JD: I'm still learning about it, to be honest. And I was off the radar for some time soon after we returned because I had my second kid. The community is definitely larger and more diverse than it was before. It's been a little hard to find people and where they are lately.

DD: I understand. Finding kindred spirits is one thing; doing so during a global pandemic is another.

JD: I'm engaged online with great new spaces and artists here, but, you know, art in person is sadly not a reality right now.

DD: I've been amazed that in the last five to ten years so many small, emerging, and even radical spaces have opened in the city. They propose dynamic shows, highlight beautiful voices.

JD: I'm hoping that, as commercial-rent prices go down with the pandemic, we'll see spaces do more – and for more people.

DD: Let's hope so. Can you speak, Julia, to how your practice sits with other things in the world? What are some of the questions that you go back to often?

JD: Questions I'm asking lately are about privacy – or definitions of the private versus the public – and access.

DD: Some of your recurring themes. If I read further into what you said earlier about your practice having this ... physical relationship with materials and a "choreographed" relationship to viewers, I can see those questions.

JD: In the Montreal show, these questions are mostly directly thought through with the new "hug" pieces.

DD: Yeah. They're on my mind. I guess I miss hugging people.

JD: That was it. At the beginning of the pandemic I was working with a fabricator. Suddenly, I needed to be closer to the material. The pandemic made me realize that I missed freedom of movement, I missed touch.

DD: Yes!

JD: I didn't realize how much I took for granted.

DD: Absolutely.

JD: And the "hug" series also plays into my love of what I call dirty minimalism. I cannot believe in perfection: the beautiful, pristine surfaces of the minimalists of the 1960s and '70s. I'm interested in revealing the hand; making the labour obvious, accessible; seeing traces of touch. You get the idea. The "hug" sculptures connect to this thread through my practice – and, at the same time, speak directly to broader social circumstances.

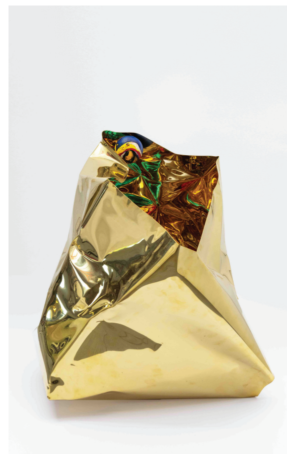
DD: Yeah. Dirty minimalism. I'll remember that.

JD: I developed the term when making the Plexiglas sculptures. With those pieces, my self-imposed rules kept me from planning my work in advance, cutting holes or shaping the sheets – any advance manipulation. Every piece was made on site from scratch; I wanted to turn the site of exhibition into a site of production. Thus the *dirty* of dirty minimlism: you see the scratches and dings that result from the making. There's nowhere to hide.

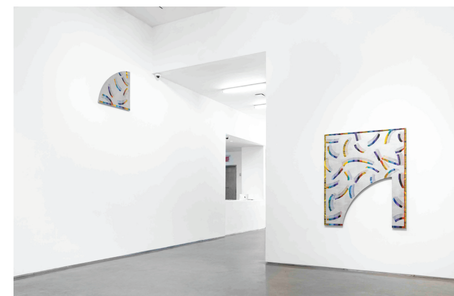
DD: You've mentioned rules here and there in interviews. What is in your rulebook?

JD: [Laughing] For those sculptures, there could be no preplanning and no repeating myself. Each one had to be new. I could never use glue, nails, or screws; I had to use ropes and cords, so that the knots holding them together could be seen. Everything needed to be visible, transparent. It was an impulse rooted in the frustration I mentioned with work that relies on external information. I wanted the labour to be visible, to be felt in the tension. The rules extended to the titles, which contain date and time stamps: the names are based on how long it took for me to make them. My painting practice has always had fewer rules. The only strict one is that I don't mix colours when making under-paintings, which is a little tongue-and-cheek nod to mid-century painters. I paint straight from the tube and go from there. I've always liked the idea of responding to what is given.

DD: What's offered. Proceeding from material facts. So let me ask: what facts feel urgent to you today?



Untitled (Hug 1), 2020.



View of *More Than Words*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 2018.

JD: Everything, personally. [Both laugh]

DD: I second that! Everything.

JD: Everything, full stop. But if I had to speak to one thing – and this is in terms of art and my own work – I'd say access. For example, for this show, I've been given a couple of spaces to work with. One is the lobby area, a great space that all museum visitors cross through. Who enters these doors? What can I do to broaden access to something that is nominally for everyone but often isn't perceived that way?

What could I do to that space to bring more people in? I've been thinking about those types of things. And also, of course, the deep existential pandemic questions: what is art for? Can it really do what it needs to do? I think it can, but how? How does that change? And how could it change more? How does it speak to people? Why? Which people?

DD: You touched upon what you're working on for *GTA21*. Where is it at this stage? I know you may still be reflecting on things.

JD: I'm working on a site-specific installation for the lobby and then working on new paintings – including some new sculptural paintings. That's really about all I can say at this point.

DD: When you think about a space like MOCA, do you imagine the conversation between your works in different locations as being direct? Or do the works engage in separate dialogues?

JD: I'm thinking of them as more directly related. In my last show at my New York gallery, I included a painting called *Mothership* that had a big chunk cut out of it. That cutout piece was integral to the painting and could be shown tucked into place or out on its own. For the show, I placed it waaaayy up high on the wall. I imagine some people didn't even see it. It's part of that subtle choreography I was talking about.

DD: There is a lot of potential in that dynamic – separate and yet together.

JD: Interconnected, co-dependent, interdependent: I think there is great potential in thinking through those terms; I'm still brainstorming. And the idea of moving through space and generating memories you carry with you and can engage anew, elsewhere.

DD: I find this idea of re-engagement quite moving actually.

JD: There is so much to work within just that one idea. So, to return to your original question, something will definitely happen between that first-floor space and the second.

DD: I like what you've just alluded to, this idea of art as a memory that informs or even just lingers in the back of your mind as you have new experiences. I think that can be so powerful. Before we end this conversation: what are you reading these days? What are some texts you return to in the studio?

JD: I'm reading Gerhard Richter's writings right now.

DD: Oh, how's that?

JD: I've always been intrigued by his engagement in both abstraction and figuration. In reading his writing, I've been surprised by how self-effacing he is. I wasn't expecting that!

DD: Ha!

JD: It's interesting to see how artists, painters in particular, articulate their own practices and inner worlds. Painting can be really, really hard. When I'm stuck or in a dark place, I tend to read artists' writings. I return often to Anne Truitt's journals.

DD: I quote them all the time! They're extraordinary. They are such an incredible testimony and archive of an artistic practice.

JD: Absolutely. Reading helps me think. So does walking. During the little bit of free time I've had lately, I've been walking.

DD: Action. Coming back in again.

JD: After my children are asleep I'll go out for night walks. I don't play music. I don't listen to anything. I'm just with my thoughts.

DD: Hopefully, the next time I see you, we can go for a walk and talk about books a little longer.

JD: I'd love that.

Tom Chung

This conversation between Tom Chung, who was in Vancouver, and November Paynter, who was in Toronto, took place via video chat in December 2020.

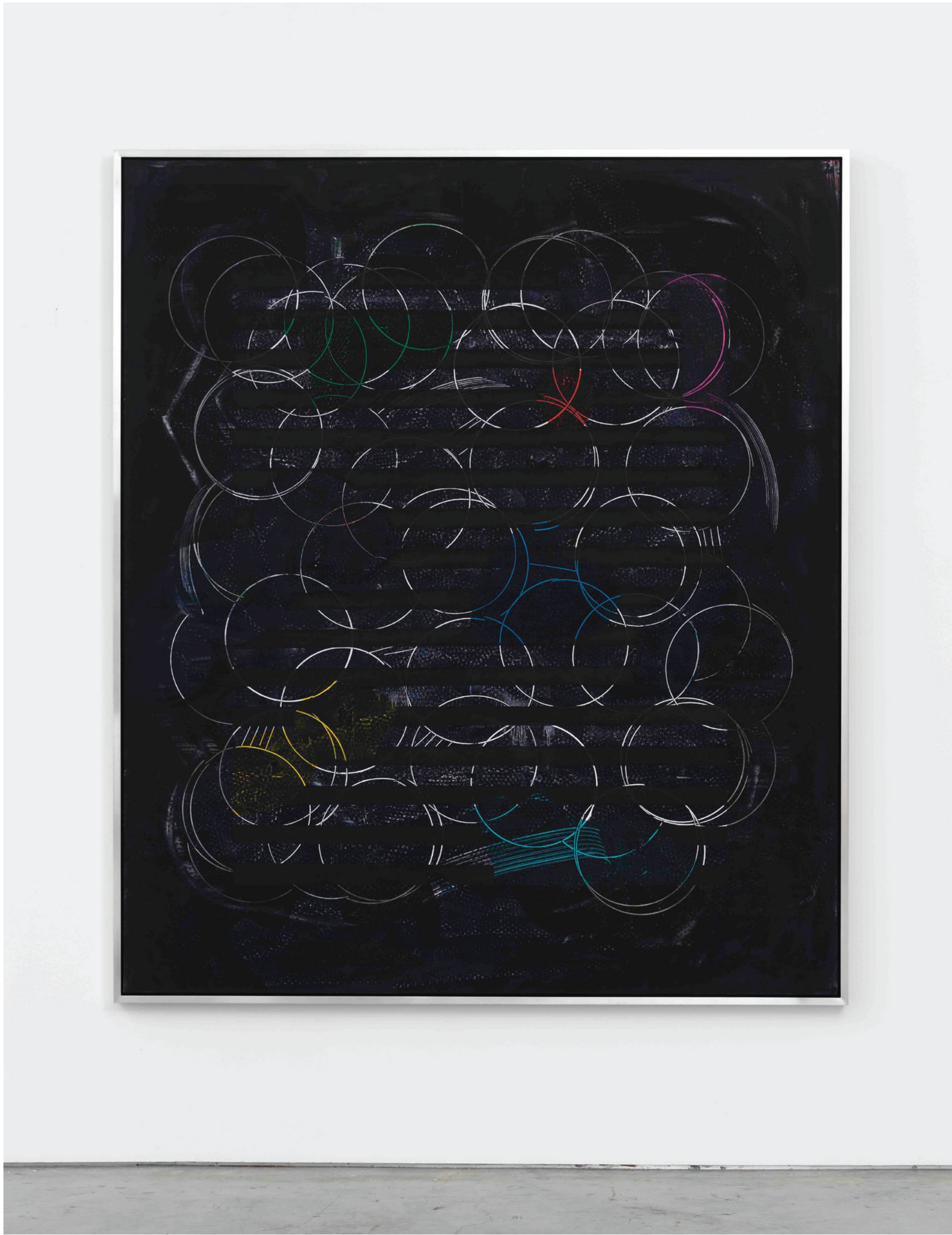
NOVEMBER PAYNTER: How would you describe your practice?

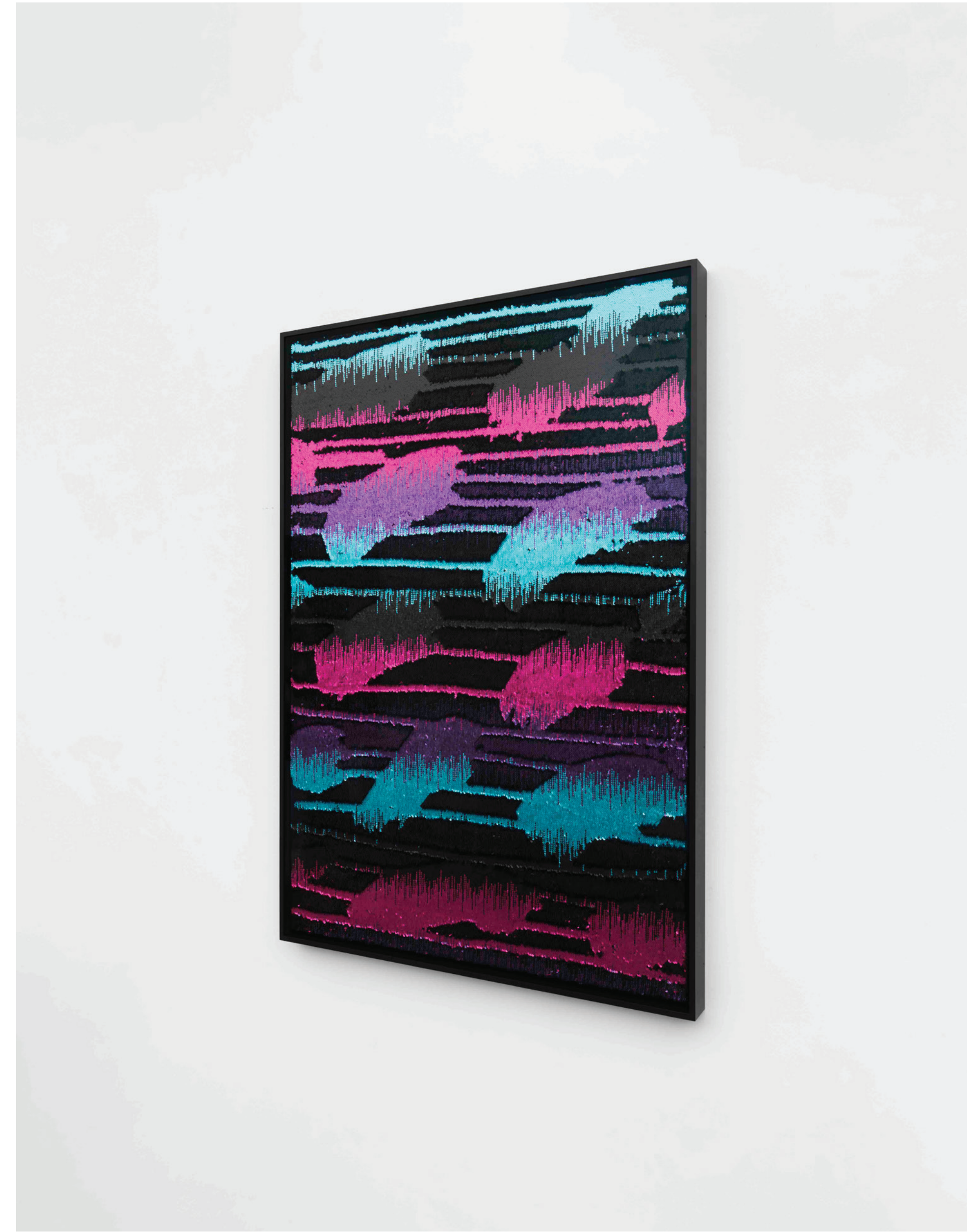
TOM CHUNG: You're catching me at a weird moment. Last year I moved from Toronto, where I had a studio, to Rotterdam, where I worked out of an apartment. Right now, I'm quarantining in my parents' basement in Vancouver. I don't think I have ever been this untethered, so I'm more prepared than I could have been for this situation we're all in.

Generally, my industry works on a royalty model. I design a product and then I work to put it into production with a company. I don't make any money during that period. Once the product begins to sell, you get a little money. It takes around three years, if it's successful, before you receive a decent income; so that's a roughly six-year period from first concept to a "salary." I started my studio six years ago and began working with companies right away. I have many projects that are finished and coming out in the near future, so right now I have a bunch of free time. But I'm still not sure if my practice will be financially viable in the long term. I'm focusing on other things and I am not designing too much.

NP: Is that because your products are commission-based? Are you compelled to design outside of a commission?

TC: I haven't been, lately – not at all. No one commissions young designers with zero credibility, so at the start it's a rat race: everyone is trying to independently develop and prototype designs and show them to the decision-makers who might produce them. For 99.9% of people it's an impossible business model. I was really





Better Angels

Jason Farago

There is the question of asserting yourself. For nearly a century, ever since Kazimir Malevich and his comrades staged their "last" painting exhibition in a Petrograd salon, artists in the trenches of abstraction have worked amid doubts of belatedness: the possibility of authentic creation seems past, and you are left with the picked-over bones of critique and quotation. Somehow you must keep going, as every serious artist knows. And yet history bears down, implacable, unfeeling. How do you do it? How do you surmount the insurmountable, and not just survive the encounter but win your challenger's benediction?

The earliest answer rests in the Book of Genesis: you wrestle. Afraid that his aggrieved half-brother will kill him when he returns to Canaan, Jacob comes across a man he has never seen before. An angel, it turns out. That night, alone by the River Jordan, the two of them go at it. The angel breaks Jacob's hip. At daybreak they are still tussling, and when the angel surrenders Jacob will not let go, "except thou bless me." The angel agrees, and gives him a new name for his troubles: *Israel*, etymologists suppose, means "wrestled with God." Yet what counts is not the name but the sanction. A new day dawns. It might have been all a dream, a vision. But the wrestling has paid off, and Jacob has more life.[1]

Is Julia Dault our generation's canniest wrestler, an artist who moves forward by grappling with the past? The athletic designation first comes to mind when you see her precarious, reflective sculptures: bundles of industrial material that she arduously cinches and fashions into totems balanced against the wall. Alone in the white cube, without tools or assistants, Dault plies and crumples sheets of Formica or Plexiglas—sometimes iridescent, sometimes printed with intricate patterning—and the finished sculptures occasionally bear scuffs or bumps on their surfaces, scars from the tussling that Dault directed. Her earliest bundles were tied with string, but lately she has been using a literally pugilistic apparatus: the black heavy-duty cotton wraps that boxers use to bind their hands.

But Dault's grappling is not confined to the gallery, and in not only her sculptures but also her paintings she has evinced a marked, consistent willingness to wrestle with earlier models of non-objective art making. She was trained as an art historian, graduating from McGill University in 2001, and for years before she pursued art full-time she worked as a critic for the *National Post* and other publications. That historical grounding becomes quickly evident when you gaze at the warped surfaces of her crumpled sculptures. If they are sprung with potential energy, bolted as they are into only barely contained contortions, they also are freighted with historical weight. The chance structures of early modernism, whether Hans Arp's torn papers or Ellsworth Kelly's aleatory compositions, are taken on as Dault gropes her media into unplanned loops and curlicues. Or the contingent forms of post-Minimal sculpture, such as Robert Morris's draped felt and Eva Hesse's resin repetitions, are tackled as Dault reshapes her industrial materials without modification or cutting to size. The physical process of making her sculptures—in situ, always, rather than in the studio—is only the last of Dault's grapplings.

History was an angel, so far as Walter Benjamin could tell: a fearsome, destructive, backward-facing seraph that looked something like the gap-toothed god with corkscrew curls in Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus*.[2] That is the angel Dault is really wrestling with, whose benediction she really seeks, and the struggle lasts much longer than the time in the gallery recorded in each sculpture's title. Dault's sculptures and paintings are not critiques of the historical avant-garde, and certainly not imitations of them, but something slipperier and more cunning. They're acts of squaring off, in which making art and thinking about art are one and the same enterprise.

"I'll never shake my devotion to the minimal aesthetic", Dault once told an interviewer. "Yet embedded in my practice is a critique of phoned-in fabrication, the notion that the maker and the making can be divorced. I equate my aesthetic to a dirty Minimalism, arguably the exact opposite of Finish Fetish work."[3] A *dirty* Minimalism: it's a redolent phrase, but one should be careful not to misunderstand it as evoking Dan Flavin neons on the fritz or Donald Judd boxes fringed with fingerprints. While she grapples with industrial materials, unheated and unsliced when she brings them into the gallery, Dault is also grappling with postwar sculpture's adoption of industrial methods of fabrication, and the recession of conceptual or anti-illusionistic forms of art making into just another means of commercial production. Yet here's the thing: to reintroduce the hand of the artist into a nonobjective sculptural vocabulary without falling into an antimodern romanticism is no small order. It turns out, as Dault has discovered, that the hand alone is not enough. It requires a full-body effort.[4]

Modernism is our antiquity, as TJ Clark has insisted. Roger M Buergel has gone further, and said modernity itself is our version of the Greek past.[5] The iconoclastic and (unsuccessfully) utopian practices of our grandparents' generation appear to us the way that Attic marbles must have seemed to Winckelmann and the early archaeologists: beautiful but unresponsive proof texts of a fallen society, which we might learn from, aspire to, idolize, but never truly revive. And so we must make our own little neo-Renaissance in the rubble at the feet of the angel of history, even if it exhausts us: even if, hours after you start, you are still struggling to bend and kink the stuff of industry into the stuff of art. Dault's sculptures espouse, in the fact of their making, a commitment to living through history—which is a far rarer dedication than you might suppose among abstract artists. It is difficult, perhaps even painful, but the benediction comes no other way.

Dault makes her sculptures in the gallery. Her studio is for painting. The sculptures are produced in a single outing, while the paintings take months and are constantly revised. The gap between her two practices is narrower than you might suppose, however, for here too she is grappling with absent modern spirits. Most of Dault's paintings are structured according to an underlying grid, which Rosalind Krauss identified as "the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century" (she meant the twentieth) and that "announces… modern art's will to silence."[6] But the grids get wonky and elastic as Dault overpaints and erases with frequent all-over motions, the product of her only half-apologetic love for more gestural kinds of non-objectivity. Each painting is a scrimmage between rule-based rigor and expressionistic freedom, playing out the history of modern painting even as it seeks something new.

Like Jackson Pollock with his wooden dowel or Gerhard Richter with his two-handed mega-squeegee, Dault favors irregular tools, from a rubber comb to a sea sponge, tree branches, or even door handles. (She is surely the first painter to apply acrylic with a stick of Twizzlers licorice.) Dault maneuvers these strange items over the canvas in discrete, repeated motions. A few paintings, such as *Heavy Metal* (p 62), are created via a careful use of tools in *both* the artist's hands: paint dragged in one direction is buffeted from the other, resulting in streaks that crash into half-moons. The results take countless forms—stripes, waves, zigzags, grids—and are deployed in the same painting, on multiple layers. In the oil-on-leather *Indecent Proposal* (p 42), for instance, repeated black squiggles are overlaid with wide pink stripes that are each painted in a single gesture, the pigment petering out as they progress from top-left to bottom-right. *Cloud Nine* and *Magic Mountain*

cover multicolored backgrounds with energetic whitewashes that are then partially effaced: via soft sinusoidal curves in the former painting, with bold diagonal slashes in the latter. Dault's repeated gestures with unconventional, even resistant painting implements muffle any obvious link between the artist's hand and her purposes. Yet no two are the same, and her rigorous paintings somehow guard a place for fragility, error, slippage, risk, imbalance, bad taste—and, not last, a forthright beauty.

One of Dault's most consistent and surprising tactics is the use of *sgraffito*, the scratching through of one or more superior layers of paint to reveal the primer underneath. Consider her astral painting *Flight of the Navigator* (p 162): a top coat of black is nearly opaque around the edges of the composition, while in the center of the canvas stripes of black have been combed away to reveal a hallucinogenic palette of cyan, Mardi Gras purple, and Harlequin green. *Sgraffito* had a central place in the art of the Renaissance, not only among painters but among architects, and saw something of a revival in the twentieth century—above all in the paintings and works on paper of Jean Dubuffet, who incised his scumbled and haunted figures out of layers of pigment and dirt. Or of Cy Twombly, whose large-scale canvases of the 1950s started as gestural abstractions and began to incorporate excisions and scratchings. It is less fashionable today, and *sgraffito* may now be most familiar as a school lesson; art educators often introduce children to color theory by having them cover a sheet of paper with wild hues, then obscure the colors with a black wax crayon, and finally scratch the crayon away with a nail or a popsicle stick. (In the United States, this elementary *sgraffito* is sometimes called "black magic": a weirdly occult name for such a modest technique.)

But *sgraffito*, an act in which form derives from a productive confrontation with what came before, is an apt metaphor for Dault's larger artistic endeavor, and that endeavor is meant to be read on the surface of each painting. The marks Dault makes are frequently asymmetrical, so that the actions of dragging, scratching, subtracting, and revealing are legible even as the entire surface coheres into a single composition. In *Cosmic Journey* (p 147), for example, a wall of horizontal black striations is overlaid with a dozen circles, evidently painted by rotating an object through a slick of white; the pigment peters out as the object completes its revolution, and so the underlying stripes show through in places. Distinctions between gestural and non-gestural forms of painting, between more conceptual and more expressionistic models of non-objectivity, thus begin to feel overdrawn as one looks longer at Dault's paintings. They are interlocking strategies, and both of them are necessary to pick one's way through the debris of the last century.

The sculptures are all untitled: each bears only a number and the time required for its making. The paintings, on the other hand, are titled with an arbitrariness that can reach a comic sublime, and their pop culture references imbue Dault's deep-thinking painting with welcome levity. (This is a proclivity she shares with another die-hard of abstraction, Frank Stella—who christened both his rigorous black stripes and his baroque aluminum confections with the way-out-of-left-field names of Polish villages, Brazilian birds and Enlightenment sonatas.[7]) Very rarely the titles propose some indexical reference: *Chasing Waterfalls* (p 146), with its bold grid of semicircular waves, unabashedly summons forth the ladies of TLC jiving in a music video oasis. Usually, though, the titles are incongruous. Many of her titles derive from pop music; *Heat Wave* (p 38) takes its name from a Motown banger by Martha and the Vandellas, while *Major Lazer* (p 67) honors a Jamaican dancehall act.

Dault seems to delight in saddling her ambitious paintings with titles that advertise their vacancy. *SkyTrax* (p 159), for one, shares its name with an airline consultancy. *The Freshmaker* (p 42) gets its title, strange to say, from the slogan of a breath mint.

Not every artist would name her first major retrospective in her home country after a Milli Vanilli song, but *Blame It on the Rain* is hardly Dault's only invocation of early 1990s pop. The paintings' titles bristle with allusions to (the first) George Bush-era MTV, or perhaps Brian Mulroney-era MuchMusic, and the earthbound angels of modernism find themselves in the unlikely company of Marky Mark (in the painting *Good Vibrations*, p 74), MC Hammer (*2 Legit*), and the long-forgotten Debbie Gibson (*Electric Youth*). The titles are arbitrary only insofar as they demur from formal description; these are ways of wrestling with history too. Janet Jackson seems a frequent demiurge, whether in the painting *Escapade* (pp 46–47), which features row upon row of scraped triangles interrupted by particoloured stripes, or in a nearly psychedelic composition of white waves that bears the proud name *Rhythm Nation*, after Jackson's 1989 classic of politicized new jack swing. "They said it wouldn't last / We had to prove them wrong," goes the chorus of that album's best song, which is as good a motto as any. Modernity may be our antiquity, but there is still much more life to be won.

1 For more on the relationship between wrestling and "more life," see Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg, *The Book of J*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, pp 217–218.

2 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, eds, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p 392. RH Quaytman, whose rule-based and systematic paintings have certain affinities with Dault's art, investigated the history of Klee's *Angelus Novus* and its repercussions for contemporary abstraction in a 2015 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

3 Sara Roffino and Benjamin Sutton, "21 Questions for Anti-Finish Fetishist and 'Tacky Fabrics' Redeemer Julia Dault," *Blouin ArtInfo*, 25 February 2013, http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/871534/21-questions-for-anti-finish-fetishist-and-tacky-fabrics#sthash.rp4uCcdi.dpuf.

4 It's worth insisting that while Dault's sculptures may be processual, they are not performative. She does not document their act of making, and never invites spectators. The final artworks may be infused with labour and with effort, but labour and effort are not themselves aesthetic here; they are means to aesthetic ends.

5 TJ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999, p 3. Roger M Buergel, "Leitmotifs," *documenta 12*, 2005, http://www.documenta12.de/index.php?id=leitmotive&L=1. Buergel curated the show *documenta 12*, 2007, which featured at its entrance a reproduction of Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

6 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, vol 9, summer 1979, pp 50–52.

7 On abstraction and titles, see Jordan Kantor, "Frank Painting," *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, Michael Auping ed, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015, pp 44–46.