

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sebastian Smee, "the Artist Who Labels Herself," *The Boston Globe*, December, 2010

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An artist who labels herself

Frances Stark puts words to work, with wit



Frances Stark's "Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write." (Katrin Schilling)

Frances Stark is obsessed with something akin to the problem we all face every time we set about achieving anything: How to filter out distractions, white noise, and the marginalia of the mind. How to make thoughts cohere.

Currently enjoying her first US museum survey at MIT's List Visual Arts Center, Stark is also obsessed — and here is where she differs from most of us — with how to make art.

Apparently, it's not easy. Or else it's almost ridiculously easy. Part of the fun of Stark's work is that she alternates between confounding and confirming our expectations of how much work is involved in producing a "work" of art.

I have my reservations about the show, but it is a lot of fun. It is the first major endeavor for the List by its new curator, João Ribas. Setting aside the near-useless

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“catalog,” a selection of Stark’s writings with only partially legible marginalia by Ribas, it’s a smart, sassy, full-throated beginning — altogether auspicious.

From her base in Los Angeles, Stark makes large, airy collages, and finicky, word-obsessed works. She also makes occasional videos (footage of her cats, mainly, with catchy soundtracks — very droll) and sculpture.

She strives, but not too hard (insouciance is integral to her approach) to produce work that transcends the banality of the everyday without, however, succumbing to pomp and self-importance.

The tension between the two — the lucidity, wit, and beauty of art versus the frustrations, false starts, and formlessness of life — makes her work endlessly surprising. Walking from work to work, you’re never sure on which side of the fence she, and you, are going to fall.

One hilarious collage, for instance, “Oh god I’m so embarrassed,” reproduces a fax sent by the artist Sean Landers to his gallery on the eve of an exhibition (sent, mind you, from the fax machine of another gallery). The artist starts out lamenting his inability to think up ideas for the exhibition invitation. Then, as the letter progresses, he is assailed by more serious doubts: “. . . it feels like I’ve totally lost my ability to make art,” Landers writes. “Perhaps I’m under too much pressure I don’t know . . . I keep wondering if I’m just a charleton [sic] . . . Oh god I’m so embarrassed.”

The faxed letter, though enlarged, is just one part of the collage. There are also winning visuals: a mustache and hat in graphic black, a striped wall, a folded-up umbrella.

Words — as meaningless typography, but also as personal statements, commentary, correspondence, and literature — play a huge part in all Stark’s work. Unusually, and refreshingly, she even writes her own wall labels. They’re concise but sneakily high-spirited blurbs, often with a helpful clue or two.

Her approach to language runs the gamut of possibilities. There are connections between her various approaches and the urban savvy of the Cubist collagists, the punning of the Dada artists, the poetry of the Surrealists, the irony of Pop, and the more cerebral antics of the Conceptualists.

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One set of indecipherable squiggles arranged like columns of text reminded me of Cy Twombly's "Letter of Resignation," a similar — though infinitely more heartbreaking — set of crossed-out scrawls. But Stark's squiggles are interrupted at two points by neatly printed text. The first reads "ART AS EXPERIENCE," and the second, "HAVING AN EXPERIENCE."

"Are we?" we might wonder. "Having an experience?"

I guess so. But who knows how much to value it, or to whom one might recommend it? The work is typical of Stark's existential — not to say postmodern, and slyly comic — approach to the business of art-making.

One large, intricate work shows a female figure from above staring at a piece of paper. "Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write" is the poignant title. Poignant, because she is in fact assembled from collaged printed matter.

Another beautifully made collage has the arresting, E.E. Cummings-esque title "And brrrrptzzap* the subject (* = scrambled)." It shows a peacock made out of collaged paper with large letters in place of the usual O-shaped motif of the peacock's feathers.

In Greek mythology, those Os represent the hundred eyes of the all-seeing giant, Argus, transposed to the peacock by the goddess Hera when Argus was slain. The letters that have replaced those Os in Stark's work seem to denote the swarming, scrambled confusions of language, forever threatening the pleasures of seeing. Stark's work has the kind of open-ended wit that encourages multiple interpretations. It's also alert (and this may be its strongest suit) to the possibility, even the likelihood, of failure.

Failure is a legitimate, even a rather grand, subject for art. (It's interesting to note that MIT Press and London's Whitechapel Gallery have just released a terrific compilation of writings on the theme of failure and its relation to contemporary art and thought.) But Stark's insistence on it — on failure not just in art but in love and life, too — occasionally overwhelms one's inclination to remain interested.

One characteristic work, "Toward a Score for 'Load every rift with ore,'" includes a literary nod to the poet Keats, who advised Shelley to "curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore" — a fond but still

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rather devastating piece of advice that calls to mind Degas's comment to his friend Whistler: "You behave as if you had no talent."

What's amusing about Stark is that in her work she is constantly behaving as if she had no talent, or insufficient ore to mine. That's what her work is about, what it enacts, what it demonstrates. But over the course of a whole show, it can become wearying, inducing the same kind of exasperation Degas felt in the presence of Whistler.

Stark sees herself as a writer as well as an artist. Her head is filled with allusions to literature, poetry, films, and philosophy. One of her wall texts claims:

"Ideally you want to find yourself in a position that allows for you to have easy access to everything that has ever crossed your mind." The work, a tremendously odd but winning composition, is called "An Unfolding Soft Secretary with Finials."

Like many of Stark's works, and like the wordplay of Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp, it has erotic as well as bookish overtones. Elsewhere in the show, a PowerPoint presentation on a laptop is suggestively called "Structures that Fit My Opening." The display of the title is accompanied by canned laughter.

The work combines text, photographs, and soundtrack. The text includes forlorn statements about Stark's "habit of loitering in the gaps between work and life" and her longing for "ecstatic reciprocal attention-paying."

Addressing these kinds of issues inevitably involves a certain amount of navel-gazing, which some people may find off-putting. But for the most part, Stark does more than just address them: She deepens them, adding layers of mischief, comedy, and pathos.

Indeed, most of the show's comedy derives from the tension between the narcissism and neediness of the artist and the seemingly insurmountable problem of finding inspiration in the midst of domestic drudgery and child-raising.

Among the works' more suggestive titles are "I went through my bin (again)," "I must explain (again)," and "This could become a gimick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind."

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The latter is also the show's title. It derives from some marginalia written on Page 20 of "The Voyeur," a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet. The work is a carbon transfer on rice paper. Stark has copied out both the text of Page 20 and the marginalia.

Is the resulting work a gimmick, or "an honest articulation of the workings of the mind"?

Perhaps it's something more? Perhaps it's art.

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CORRECTION: An earlier version of this review misidentified João Ribas's position. Ribas is the curator at MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

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