

MOCA

Greater Toronto Art '21

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Art**
Toronto Canada

GTA 21

Toronto's
Most Exciting
Contemporary
Artists

Julia Dault

01: Ambivalence



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?

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

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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.

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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 minimalism: 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 pre-planning 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.

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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 waaaay 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.



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

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

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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.

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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.

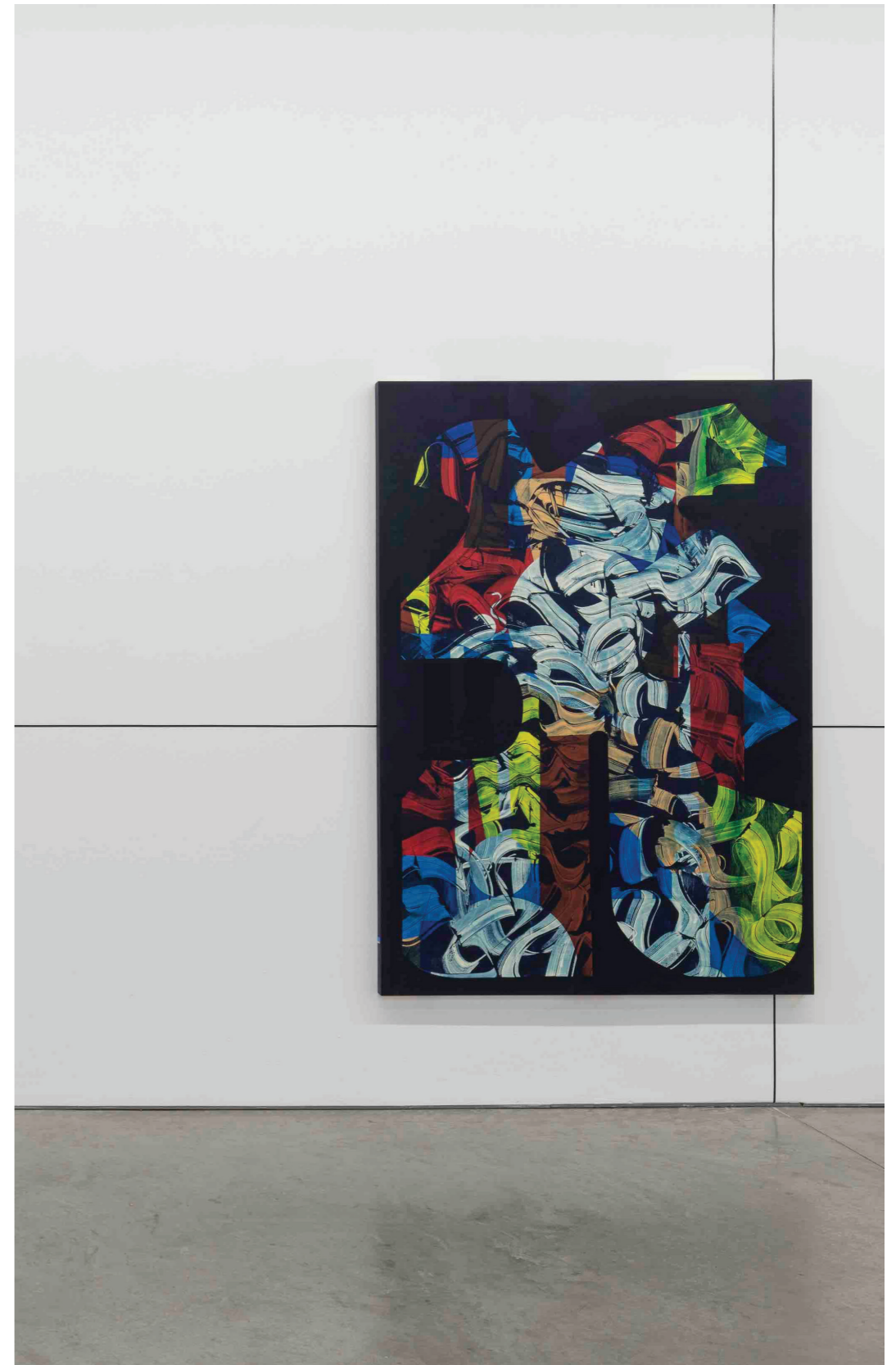
DD: Hopefully, the next time I see you, we can go for a walk and talk about books a little longer.

JD: I'd love that.



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