

Cay Bahnmitter
June 5 - July 24, 2021



Cay Bahnmitter, *Home Sweet Home*, 2003, oil, latex and marker on metal sign and wood assemblage, 18 x 21.5 x 3 in. (45.7 x 54.6 x 7.6 cm)

What Pipeline is honored to present the work of Cay Bahnmitter in her first posthumous solo exhibition.

Cay Bahnmitter (b. 1955 Wayne, MI; d. 2007 Detroit) received a BFA Summa Cum Laude from the University of Michigan in 1976. She was a polymath with a fervent appetite for languages, architecture, philosophy, poetry, literature and art. Her work infused these subjects with an intense lived experience that was at times emotionally fraught. She exhibited at Feigenson Gallery and Susanne Hilberry Gallery, was collected by Gil and Lila Silverman, and is in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

This show consists of works spanning 26 years, from 1980 to 2006, and serves as a reintroduction to Bahnmitter's work. It's a selective survey representing overlapping bodies of work in an attempt to capture her nature, including late work that has never been exhibited.

"I've always been told I'm too sensitive. I find that most of the world isn't sensitive enough... If you're comfortable today, I'm a bit concerned because there are so many people that are not comfortable."¹

Bahnmitter was legendary not only for her prodigious output but also for her presence, which could be charming or destructive. She knew her work, and herself, were difficult but fought for both to be seen. Making it plain that she had "nothing to hide,"² Bahnmitter was open about her mental and physical trauma, and about being a survivor of a violent sexual assault. She related as an underdog, struggling to make sense of the world and the pain inflicted on the sick and the poor. Seeing her personal strife reflected in the increasingly apparent problems of the world, she wrote errant messages on the backs of works such as "no computer don't want one/ pray for the rainforest."³

She spent her youth in Argentina and Germany, and words like *Rosada* and *Ihre Schuhe* run through works like threads. But Detroit, the city of her birth, was her obsession. In letters to friends filled paradoxically with self-doubt and self-assurance, she questioned the city's ability to support her, but could not leave. Her first major body of work, exhibited in 1980, used Detroit as a conceptual investigative framework, exploring and documenting specific locations and land use, especially in Southwest Detroit. She sketched parks and interviewed locals about changes in public spaces, noting their reactions and thoughts in detailed surveys that remain as archives of the city at that time.

This documentation manifested in volumes of notebooks, slides, drawings, Xeroxes, paintings and sculptures. Referring to the resulting works as “very Bauhaus and severe,”⁴ she said she “exhausted the possibilities of the city”⁵ and thereafter began turning inward, opening her work to interiority, memory and dreams. The resulting works are “wholly subjective expressions of an interiorized space”⁶ built from “close investigation of the immediate urban environment and the simultaneous overlay of text and thought upon object and place.”⁷ This exploration would continue to inform numerous series of work throughout the rest of her life.

“Painting is inscription, rather than description.”⁸

Besides painting, Bahnmiller's life revolved around reading and writing. She was an extensive letter writer and journaler, logging decades of dreams and attempts at their interpretation. If she read a book over and over again “it becomes a painting,”⁹ she said, its pages thick with drawings and paint. Poets who wrote about despair and death reappeared as text scrawled into layered brushstrokes. She frequently evoked Emily Dickinson, writing “Dickenson [sic] was one of the earliest to embody the negative dialectics that Adorno much later went on to explicate. Often my method of painting, where the paint is applied and negated, excavated, resembles a similar poetic.”¹⁰ Other important recurring figures include Russian poet Anna Ahkmatova and her life situated on the Neva River, and D.H. Lawrence, whose poem *The Ship of Death* inspired a large series of works.



Cay Bahnmiller at home in 1993. Photographer unknown.

Despite the often dour subjects, Bahnmiller's work was not without irony. She saw “cycles of history”¹¹ in Detroit's inversion into landscapes returning to nature, and used motifs like stagecoaches to create a “condensation of memory and satire.”¹² In her expressive work she implored for justice, but also sought the refuge of mental and spiritual escape. Poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, a contemporary influence, wrote “such emotional disturbances are interruptions in landscape.”¹³ Bahnmiller similarly shifted between relating experience with abstract language and exacting detail, stating “I work on unstretched pieces of canvas, and employ both collage, drawing and methods akin to quilting and soldering in some of the works, while maintaining a search for pure painting.”¹⁴

What Pipeline presents this solo exhibition in what we endeavor to be the first of many opportunities to explore the work and life of Cay Bahnmiller. In addition to this show, a series of works on paper will be featured in the 2021 edition of Art Mile Detroit.

Endnotes

- 1 Cay Bahnmitter quoted in Melissa Giannini, "Out From the Dark," *The Metro Times*, (The Metro Times, October 29, 2003), <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/out-from-the-dark/Content?oid=2177312>.
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Cay Bahnmitter writing on the back of the left panel of her diptych work *Untitled*, undated, oil, latex, sharpie on Masonite and wood, 48 x 36 x 1.25 (122 x 91 x 3 cm), *What Pipeline*, Detroit, Michigan.
- 4 Bahnmitter quoted in *The Metro Times*.
- 5 Cay Bahnmitter quoted in MaryAnn Wilkinson, "Personal Effects: Paintings by Cay Bahnmitter," essay written for a solo exhibition at Susanne Hilberry Gallery, November 16, 1990.
- 6 Cay Bahnmitter, "Statement," 1993.
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Bahnmitter quoted in *The Metro Times*.
- 10 Bahnmitter, "Statement," 1993.
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, "Texas," in *Conjunctions*, Volume 6, Spring 1984, page unknown, <http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/mei-mei-berssenbrugge-c6>.
- 14 Bahnmitter, "Statement," 1993.