



Cay Bahnmiller, untitled, undated, oil, latex, marker, adhesive tape, colored pencil, and collage on board, 11 3/4 × 9".

Cay Bahnmiller

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This was the first solo show in Europe for Cay Bahnmiller (1955–2007). Focusing on sculptures, works on paper, and books, the presentation featured an excellent selection spanning the period from 1989 to 2004—almost a miniretrospective, but excluding the American artist's larger paintings. The show demonstrated Bahnmiller's radicalism and her inventiveness in continually

enlarging and rethinking her painterly practice, extending it to formats beyond the classic panel painting. It also underscored how much painting, for her, was a part of living. She thought of her work as an open process, a kind of chronicle fed by deep thinking about whatever she was reading (from Bertolt Brecht to Mei-meï Berssenbrugge) and acute and probing observations of herself and everyday life. Almost all her painterly works on paper feature everyday ephemera: lists, notes, poems, photographs, personal communications, pages torn from books. Hers was a fluid practice that always kept open the question: What else might painting yet become?

Take the three sculptures—compact, hermetic-looking wooden objects, all untitled (two undated, one 1989)—that Bahnmitter repeatedly reworked over the course of more than a decade. (Her pieces are generally dated by the year of their completion, as it might be impossible to tell when work on each began.) Painting, here, is a kind of sedimentation, the original object disappearing beneath accretions of crusty opaque paint applied over time. The base material of the works likely consisted of chance finds from the artist's urban surroundings. The use of paint to transform objets trouvés into small sculptures lends them a peculiar indeterminacy: One vaguely imagines that they were formerly of some use, but now these scattered fragments of reality have taken on an air of immutability and otherworldliness. That, too, is something painting can do: In accumulating and cementing time, it paves the way for an abstraction of real things, infusing them with interiority.

Reworking and recasting ostensibly finished pieces was a defining element of Bahnmitter's practice. Her creative restlessness, palpable throughout her work, resulted in a process fueled by ongoing self-contradiction. Her perpetual self-interrogation and revision has been read as a deeply reflective form of productivity, yet also as self-sabotage. There is presumably some truth to both. Perhaps her practice might be best described as an inverted archaeology: Rather than removing strata, it stores them up in unending succession. Bahnmitter labored to bury experiences, readings, and feelings—not all of them sanguine—in her pictures, to seal them up among painterly gestures, found materials, and poetic composition, safeguarding them in an occult presence.

Bahnmitter's books and works on paper are complex pictorial amalgams in which layers of writing and paint are intimately alloyed. The coarse-textured recto of one of these sheets (untitled, undated) shows two vertical elements along its edges—figures, perhaps, or houses, both in dark tones and compact volumes, with terse, shimmering gestural brushwork in blue hovering above. The composition in part overlies and in part frames the lines of a poem at its center. But Bahnmitter also used the drawing's (normally unseen) verso, onto which she collaged a page from a court record: Having been violently attacked in 1993, she reported the assailant to the police, but he was acquitted—an experience that left her doubly traumatized. The record is literally preserved in the work.

BahnMiller sometimes delved deep into her own history. Consider *B.A. 1959*, undated: Partly covered by tape, its paint strata showing minute cracks, the picture is divided by the line between sky and sea, with a ship vaguely identifiable on the horizon, to the right. The rather rough composition in dark browns and beiges is interrupted by bold brushstrokes in a dazzling yellow: slender dashes of dry paint—rays of light, perhaps. In 1959, when BahnMiller was four, her family moved to Buenos Aires, making the work a recollection of the voyage—a painterly expedition into the realm of distant memories.

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

—Jens Asthoff