

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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“A Deconstructed Hunting Cabin Filled with Fabricated Memories”

by A. Will Brown

LOS ANGELES — April Street’s solo exhibition *Lay Down Your Arms*, currently on view at the West Hollywood gallery Various Small Fires, is both visually engaging and spatially distinct. The show includes a range of artworks in varying forms — sculptural installation, five-channel audio, painting, bronze, and painted and stretched sheen hosiery. Over three spaces including an exterior corridor, a minimal concrete and gravel courtyard, and a small, white-walled gallery space, Street weaves a dreamy narrative rife with formal and conceptual intrigue. While the exhibition is immersive, aesthetically subtle, and provocative, some of its elements would benefit from reevaluation.

The focal point of the exhibition is “Portrait of a Barn: 1840–2015” (2015), a standing exterior wall of a small building constructed with reclaimed wood after a found image of an Appalachian barn. The piece stands in the center of the exterior courtyard, awash in direct sunlight and the softer indirect light that reflects off the white walls that enclose the space. The rebuilt wall faces the end of the narrow corridor one traverses when entering the gallery. Below the barn wall, the installation’s second component, a wooden frame of the same dimensions and shape as the standing wall, lies on the ground like a shadow with hosiery stretched over the frame like an impossibly thin canvas. The hosiery is painted and dyed with acrylic paint to create a subtly bright, washed out, and psychedelic abstract composition.



April Street, *Portrait of Bam: 1840-2015* (2015). Reclaimed 1840-1920s barn wood, tin, steel, bronze, acrylic, hosiery, canvas, dimensions variable.

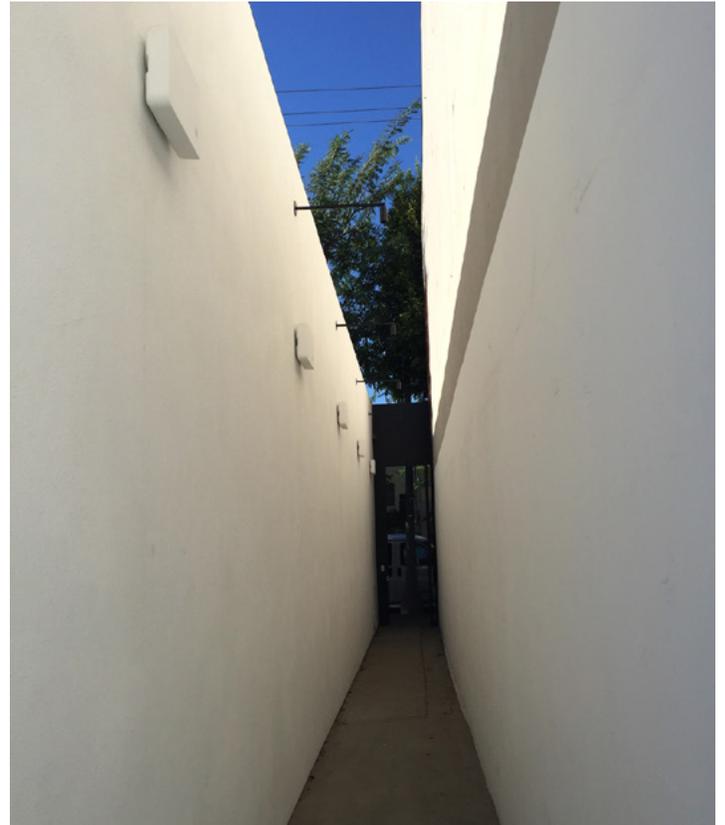
Though “Portrait of a Barn: 1840–2015” is the exhibition’s largest and most commanding work, it’s the second piece visitors encounter. A five-channel audio work, “Two Mallards” (2015), is installed in a narrow, white stucco corridor visitors must pass through first. The sound piece is composed of overlapping birdcalls and cats’ meows, performed by the artist and a stranger. The “bird” and “cat” call and respond to one another, as birds often do on a spring morning, yet here the relationship between predator and prey, cat and bird, is highlighted as a kind of distorted romance. As the first work in the exhibition, “Two Mallards” creates an unexpected yet markedly pleasing entrée to the gallery and exhibition. The sound installation is effervescent and quixotic as it permeates both the corridor and the courtyard space, washing bright natural sounds over “Portrait of a Barn”’s hard wooden edges and the visual whirlpool of the stretched hosiery on the ground.



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The two pieces work almost as one to foster the atmosphere of a memory one never actually experienced, a remembrance that, though vague, feels strikingly real. There is something of the cinematic at play between the two installations; the barn wall and the sounds blend to become what could be the remnants of a once-famous and well-used film set — props left exposed to the elements and to time. These two works engage one another and the space to create the potential for direct — even cinematic or documentary — narrative, yet don't suffer from the expectations of the weight of a specific narrative, merely the trappings of narrative itself.

The three works in the very small interior space — “Wandering Limb #34 (heartbreaker with dusting powder),” “Wandering Limb #14,” and “Magician’s Rope” (all 2015) — read as extensions or missing components of the installation in the courtyard.



April Street, *Two Mallards* (2015). five-channel sound installation

These items could have been taken from the interior of the barn. But it's important to give these three works their own spaces of interpretation, as they are formally inventive and push the boundaries of their materials. Most striking of the three is “Magician’s Rope,” a sculpture made of painted hosiery and bronze that hangs from the ceiling of the gallery and rests delicately on the ground like a stalactite that has reached the cave floor. It's aesthetically stifling that the space is so small and that one isn't able to engage with these pieces individually, as each merits long, calm looking.

Street has a penchant for creating surreal two- and three-dimensional objects that challenge convention and elude easy classification or formal explanation. Specifically, the paintings on hosiery — a remarkably subtle material — create a shocking amount of visual depth with Street's use of abstract and swirling color motifs and no



April Street, *Wandering Limb #34* (2015). (heartbreaker with dusting powder)" (2015), acrylic and pastel on hosiery over canvas painting, 68 x 52 in.

representational imagery. The largest of the flat hosiery works, "Wandering Limb #14," uses the same materials and techniques for another end and appears solid, like an animal hide mounted for display like a trophy from a hunt. Indeed, looking at the full body of work included in *Lay Down Your Arms*, the title becomes an obvious allusion to hunting, and perhaps more broadly to a society that values it — like the US.

The title and Street's interest in exploring the vernacular of her home region, Appalachian Virginia, shed some light on this exhibition's potential for critique, for formal and conceptual rhetoric that extends beyond her engaging and somewhat elusive sculptures, installations, and paintings. The barn, sound installation, and translucent sculptural



Installation view of April Street's 'Lay Down Your Arms' with "Wandering Limb #14" (2015, left), acrylic on hosiery and reclaimed wood, 68 x 92 in.; and "Magicians Rope" (2015, right), hosiery, acrylic paint, and bronze, 98 x 4 x 2 in.

paintings provide just enough detail to evoke a back-country hunting cabin filled with fading, adrenaline-laced memories, crystalized by an array of animal skins, rifles, ropes, and the ever-present calls of birds and other woodland creatures. While the hosiery paintings look like animal skins, their thinness and transparency suggest well-worn debates about hunting and gun use — trophy hunting as sport in contrast to the need of many to hunt for food, shelter, and clothing. Gender also comes to the fore as a critical component that emerges out of the adroit juxtaposition of the hard surfaces of a historically macho culture of hunting, be it for sport or survival, to the historically feminine sheen material that of which hosiery is made.

With this in mind, the largest question about this exhibition is how far does the artist intend to push this body of work, and into what territory? More space and attention to detail on the part of the gallery and an expanded interior presence including more artworks would offer Street an

opportunity to make something encompassing and remarkable beyond the well-crafted delicacy and absorbing sensitivity of these materials. The use of the corridor, the courtyard, and the small gallery space doesn't necessarily marginalize the work, but it compartmentalizes each group to the disadvantage of what could be a more engaging, subtly dramatic, and dreamy arc. Presenting all of the elements in one space would offer a stronger curatorial approach to this artist's work, as they all build upon one another both cinematically and compositionally.

Inevitably though, the painting materials, the façade of the barn, and the immersive and ephemeral nature of the sound installation mark the work in this exhibition as more evocative of a barely remembered dream, of a past and a place in time that Street willfully reimagines through what seem at times disorientingly small and abstract details. While markedly nostalgic, this is a hopeful and critically suggestive body of work that conflates dreams, lived experience, and specific memories, wrangling something universal with an arsenal of idiosyncratic materials and private iconography.

April Street's Lay Down Your Arms continues at Various Small Fires (812 North Highland Avenue, West Hollywood, Los Angeles) through December 12.