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Art Market: Review

Emily Sundblad, "The Not It Girl"

By Alice Gregory

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At her gallery, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, the painter and performer Emily Sundblad is reviving the artistic spirit of downtown New York through creative collaboration and a resistance to the cult of self-promotion.



Emily Sundblad in the gallery she co-founded and named after a fictional character, Reena Spaulings Fine Art. Credit Nicholas Calcott

On a Saturday night last spring, a small room on the second floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art was temporarily transformed into an echo chamber for beautiful and bewitching music. Dressed in a YSL tuxedo jacket, a single silver owl head pinned to each lapel, Emily Sundblad, 37, stood in the dark and sang a suite of songs by the British folk revivalist Shirley Collins. She was accompanied on guitar in purposeful fits and starts by her friend Matt Sweeney, a musician and producer who has worked with everyone from Cat Power to Billy Corgan, but he mostly disappeared into the background. For the 20 minutes she was onstage, Sundblad was the blackened room's only bright point of focus.

For nearly a decade now, Sundblad, who is a singer, painter, performance artist and gallery owner, has maintained the most coveted kind of fame a person can have in the art world: a suspended state of semi-obscure that both lends credibility and creates intrigue. Her resistance to being associated with any single medium or even name is in part to thank for this. Sundblad expends impressive amounts of energy on collaborative work, often under the umbrella of the gallery she co-founded, Reena Spaulings Fine Art named after a fictional fashion-world "it girl" and in championing her artist friends such as Juliana Huxtable and Madeleine Norling. Though Sundblad has important collectors, she

doesn't have a significant social-media presence, nor does she appear incessantly on Guest of a Guest. Hers is a Goldilocks effect, a position that seems precisely calibrated to avoid the occupational hazards of art-world success.

Born in Dalsjöfors, a tiny village in Sweden, Sundblad has lived in cities since early adolescence. After her father died when she was 11, she moved to Stockholm with her mother to study music, but spent more time as a teenager partying in gay clubs. "High school," she said in her faintly metered accent, "is when I discovered nightlife as a full-time thing, not a job, exactly, but an activity." Perhaps unsurprisingly, she dropped out and moved to London with friends, where she spent about a year interning at magazines, or, as she says, "doing bits and bobs." At 21, she found herself in New York. "I thought I could just do life my own way, but then I gradually realized I didn't have any skills," she remembered, laughing. "I didn't know how to do anything!" And so she enrolled in Parsons the New School for Design, where she mostly made impressionistic paintings. "It was the first time in my life that I had some sort of idea that I had a talent," she said. "It was a total epiphany. Like, 'Oh, I can speak.'"

The idea to open a gallery had already been germinating, but some postgraduation visa trouble more or less forced Sundblad into entrepreneurship. In 2003, she and her then-boyfriend, the artist John Kelsey, took over a storefront in Chinatown. "When people asked what it was called, we told them different names," Sundblad recalled. "We didn't know exactly what the space was yet, but we knew for sure that it wasn't a traditional New York gallery, and we didn't want our own names on it." Reena Spaulings was the protagonist of a novel that was being written by the Bernadette Corporation, a collaborative of which Kelsey was a core member. "Can an author be a multiple entity? Can a name have several agencies? These were the questions we were asking," she said. "Authorship is hardly ever pure" there's always so many people involved in the making of something, no matter what it is. It's a political position, definitely, to assume this authorless function."



BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS Clockwise from top left: a performance by Ei Arakawa at the show "Dead Already"; the gallery's reception desk/bar; the unmarked exterior of the gallery; with the musician Matt Sweeney in a performance for the Whitney Biennial earlier this year. Credit Clockwise from top left: Courtesy of Reena Spaulings; Nicholas Calcott (2); courtesy of the artists.

The artists' playful postmodern contrarianism was taken at face value; soon Reena Spaulings was participating in group shows and being written up as an individual artist, rather than as a synergistic fiction. The space has functioned as a downtown haven for artists interested in making work that challenges traditional market forces and their own identities within them. Exhibitions have included K8 Hardy's elegantly akimbo figurative sculptures; Merlin Carpenter's wry recreation of the Tate Modern's gift store and espresso bar; a single large-scale painting by Jutta Koether that remakes a Poussin landscape in menstrual red; and Klara Liden's fragrant interior crowded with discarded Christmas trees. The Reena Spaulings roster consists of artists who didn't have New York representation when the gallery opened, artists who didn't come straight out of M.F.A. programs, international artists, artists with other careers, artists who also write. They're "not just product makers," Sundblad said.

She also performs industry interrogation in her solo career. In 2011, for a show at Albus Greenspon (the gallery that represents her in New York), she painted a self-portrait that she auctioned off with Phillips de Pury immediately after the exhibition opened. "I liked that the key to the exhibition would be found at the auction house," she said. "It was a counterintuitive, purposefully self-destructive move" that thing that, as an artist, you're not supposed to do." The page from the auction catalog" which included all the typical stats such as the work's provenance and outgoing bid" was reproduced and used as the announcement for the gallery show, relevant logistical information added in by hand. The painting ended up selling for five times the amount of similar works exhibited in the gallery space. "The auction house is just such a degrading context for art," Sundblad sighed. "It's reduced to its pure market value. It's not pretty. It's a very crass reality. The whole thing was a weird, tongue-in-cheek act of prostitution."



WILD AT HEART From left: "Cigarettes," a 2011 oil painting by Sundblad; a 2011 painting, "Que Barbaro"; a show invitation, featuring Sundblad and her mother, on the gallery's bathroom wall. Credit From left: Courtesy of the artist and Albus Greenspon, New York (2); Nicholas Calcott.

Despite the fact that Sundblad is drawn to making work that might be seen as confessional" she is currently making a series of portraits of friends and colleagues" it's clear that she doesn't see her work as a lone endeavor, often preferring to forsake her own identity for that of a collaborative, fictional alter ego. She is uncomfortable with the idea of being written about, and says again and again how strange it is to be singled out. She attributes much of this to her punk adolescence: the D.I.Y. approach, the sanctification of friendship, the questioning of power and hierarchy. "It happens a lot in my life that friendships very quickly become work relationships," she said. "Maybe it's a New York thing. A big-city thing." When asked if she has friends that are "just friends," she paused for at least 10 seconds. "In Sweden I do?"

Sundblad initially had trouble relating to the role of gallerist. “It was never my dream. I felt very estranged from the job I chose, or rather the job that chose me, but I do like that you can create a new family, create a new way of existing in a group.” Sundblad’s fantasy, she said, is “to operate as a theater troupe or film troupe.” She cites Cassavetes and Fassbinder as enviable ringleaders in the field of cinema, as well as the experimental theater company the Wooster Group and the streetwear label Hood by Air.

Despite what we like to say about shock value and surprise, we’re not often moved by art that is totally foreign, utterly without context. Even the catchiest pop songs don’t sound their best on first listen. We come to our favorite artists’ openings with built-in sympathy and interest, expecting to be presented with something that bears a resemblance to previous shows. At a time when legibility and personal branding are all but requisites for success, Sundblad’s work resists this easy advantage. Looking at her drawings made in liquid eyeliner on club stationery or the bedbug she (as Reena Spaulings) has gotten cast in chrome, it becomes evident that Sundblad’s is a surprisingly old-fashioned definition of the artist — a person who convinces the viewer that, regardless of medium or message, they are always seeing the world in a remote and effortlessly special way.

That night at the Whitney, Sundblad’s voice warbled and hit bell-like registers. Joan Baez’s covers of Bob Dylan came to mind, as did lovesick Disney princesses. Her dust-colored eyelashes fluttered between notes, and after every song she allowed herself a small laugh, as though she couldn’t quite believe she was really the one producing those angelic noises. The performance — which included the premiere of *False True Love*, a provocative music video co-directed by Sundblad’s friend, the former director of 303 Gallery, Mariko Munro — was part of her contribution to this year’s Whitney Biennial. By importing something obviously and undeniably pretty into a museum where beauty has never been a metric for quality, Sundblad succeeded in transgressing the boundaries of an exhibition that can be infuriatingly lawless for a person bent on breaking rules.



Sundblad in her studio with a portrait in progress of Huxtable. Credit Nicholas Calcott

“Beautiful doesn’t always fly in the art world,” she said earlier in the afternoon, while rehearsing in the museum’s cryptlike boardroom, in which the central piece of furniture was a vast granite table shaped like a coffin. (“Well, this is cozy,” she had joked upon entering. “Matt, did you bring the drugs?”)

Eyes closed, jaw muscles quivering, Sundblad practiced her repertoire, taking breaks for sips of water. The songs, she said, have “no frivolity” but work to do what she prizes — “expressing extreme emotion in a flamboyant or almost borderline kitsch way.”

As we left the boardroom, a docent complimented Sundblad with a huge grin and a vigorously appreciative nod. Stationed just outside by the elevator bank, she had been listening through the walls for over an hour and seemed relieved to have finally heard something that sounded like neither “art” nor a trustee meeting. Sundblad thanked her in a shy and hesitant lilt. When it comes to music, she said, unexpected context can work to a performer’s advantage. “People who come to galleries and museums don’t expect a person who can actually sing and who actually rehearses,” Sundblad explained. “It’s a better audience. They’re pretty easy to please. The music hits deeper because they’re listening with bigger ears.”