

REENA SPAULINGS

AN ART BRAND

Nick Stillman



SINCE THE “FOUNDING” of Reena Spaulings sometime in 2004 a cloud of mystery has hung over the phenomenon. Who — or what — is Reena Spaulings? Painter of legal tender, rendered in the washy style of Michael Krebber? Sovereign nation/shadowy corporation? Fictional performer of are-you-a-genius-or-are-you-an-idiot dialectic of youth culture? A New York gallery? Yes... to all.

For the record: Reena Spaulings is a New York-based fictional artist whose primary catalysts are John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad, though a fluctuating cast of collaborators — Jutta Koether and Ei Arakawa are two of them — often participates in the collective’s projects. Reena Spaulings Fine Art is a tiny, shoddy gallery in Manhattan’s Chinatown that Sundblad and Kelsey opened in 2004, one of a small crop of galleries in the neighborhood that eschew codified presentational strategies of its Chelsea peers. With its perpetually drawn gate and sign saying nothing very legible, Reena Spaulings never really looks open. Finally, *Reena Spaulings* is the title and protagonist of a novel written by international collective Bernadette Corporation, a group of artists, writers, and filmmakers of which Kelsey is a member. In other words, Reena Spaulings is an art world brand.

Such manufactured mystery isn’t uncommon in contemporary art; no less mainstream a publication than the *New York Times* recently profiled Reena Spaulings and other collectives participating in this year’s Whitney Biennial, and the author, Holland Cotter, gently critiqued the Spaulings enterprise in relation to “matters of self-promotion.” The allusion was likely to Spaulings’ recent exhibition of a suite of Merlin Carpenter’s paintings. The pieces, all on the ground and leaning in stacks against the wall, could be handled and leafed through by any visitor, like a casual flip through a magazine. The paintings were clumsily realistic depictions of actual pages from recent art publications (including *Flash Art*) with articles about Reena Spaulings Fine Art and its exhibitions. Self-referential, sure, but the gesture neatly inverted concrete art world relationships; critics whose opinions ostensibly determine an artist’s reception found an uncomfortable spotlight on their own labor. And a second relationship was flipped: Reena Spaulings herself, Carpenter’s dealer in this case, was instructed by the artist to paint washy backgrounds that would serve as a background for the articles Carpenter later painted. The dealer-as-pimp, taking a 50% share of the artist’s labor for cutting a deal, was transformed by Carpenter into a laborer and a collaborator — forced to earn her 50% — restructuring the hierarchical dynamic that locates ‘dealer’ a rung above ‘artist’ on the art world food chain.

Spaulings works in the same ambiguously washy painting style for her series of “Money Paintings,” sloppily painted banknotes, most of which are somehow defamed. *Money Painting (Purple Dollar)* looks like an unfinished American dollar. Conspicuous blank spaces pepper the abject note, as if the printer suddenly realized his shift was over and slipped into the



From top: SETH PRICE, first solo exhibition, 2004. Installation view; JOSH SMITH, *Josh Smith*, 2004. Installation view. Opposite: EI ARAKAWA, *Toward A Standard Risk Architecture*, 2006. Performance documentation. All images: Courtesy Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

5 pm sunlight before finishing his work. *Money Painting (Dirty Euro)* is soiled with cigarette ashes. Defamation, in fact, pervades Spaulings’ artistic oeuvre. In her 2005 show at Haswellediger, Spaulings showed a legion of flags, as if proclaiming herself a sovereign queen with this regal showcase of what she dubbed in an enigmatic press release “hardcore art.” Flags — normally symbols of allegiance and pride — became objects of abjection in Spaulings’ hands. Many were caked in cruddy black paint, several were painted with a brick pattern, and one flowed into a basin, which included a photocopy from a pom magazine.

Spaulings’ two pieces in this year’s Whitney Biennial are both awnings manufactured by the Chinatown signage company Eastern Color Sign. No. 2, a blank vinyl façade of a shit brown hue sliced in two, presides

dumbly in a corner like a discarded mistake or a rough draft. When the curators conveyed that the awning would have to fit in a tight spot, Spaulings requested that the staff “do what they had to do to make it fit, for example with a saw.” *Emily Fisher Lan* is a white awning mounted above the Whitney’s fourth-floor elevator entrance, partially obscuring mounted text that brands the museum’s fourth floor its Emily Fisher Landau Galleries, a declaration of official sponsorship by the vice-chairwoman of the museum’s board. Spaulings’ awning obediently replaces the text it shields, but also includes various unrelated nonsense-brands: images of crustaceans, a cell phone, a diamond, a watch — readymade logos for Chinatown’s many businesses of questionable legality, black holes of capitalism in New York’s 10002 zip code.



Above: REENA SPAULINGS, *Flag*, 2004. Studio view. Below from left: MERLIN CARPENTER, *Made in USA 2*, 2005. Oil and acrylic on canvas; REENA SPAULINGS, *Money Painting (Colonial Dollar)*, 2005. Mixed media on canvas, 91 x 198 cm. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

Each of these pieces take exalted objects/concepts — flags, museum patronage, money — and totally deflate them. Each exposes and implicitly attacks an example of capitalist structuring that, as Reena thinks to herself in *Reena Spaulings*, "...not only controls each situation but, even worse, also

tries to ensure that, most of the time, there is no situation." *Reena Spaulings* may be the best way to come to terms with the Reena Spaulings project as a machine of situation-creation. Written by a lengthy cast of Bernadette Corporation members and shifting exhilaratingly in narrative structure, the novel is a *Pierrot le Fou*

like manifesto about ridding one's self of bourgeois values and achieving mastery over one's thoughts, using Reena's twentysomething body and brain as its vehicle. Its denouement is hardcore art epitomized, a violent citywide spectacle of violence and anarchy, all made possible by the ultimate hardcore art: a hurricane that devastates New York.

"Self-promotional" quibbles aside, the most valid criticism of Reena Spaulings may be that it's scenester stuff, that its fabricated downtown persona is a snobbish and escapist deflection from the 'real world,' or at least the real art world. This is legitimate, but perhaps irrelevant to Reena Spaulings' concerns, which seem to be to vacate a space (literally and figuratively) somewhere in the dizzying halls of 21st century capitalism that accommodates poetic dissent and willful deflection from real world and art world economic systems that blunt creativity (and criticism) by enveloping, branding and incorporating it. Bernadette Corporation began to blaze this path in the '90s and continues to today with its chameleon presence: as a fashion label, publishers of the confusing magazine *Made in USA*, and filmmakers. Will Reena fall prey to vultures? Maybe. After all, she *did* become a thong model in *Reena Spaulings*. But then she strategically blew the cash on nothing much at all, forcing a total refashioning of the self and making creative complacency untenable. "Is there a dream of ongoing creativity directly connected to, inclusive of all of your activities?" Reena wistfully asks fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld in *Reena Spaulings*. The potential of this dream is the essence of Reena Spaulings. ■

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John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad are the directors of Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

Reena Spaulings is a collective founded in 2004 in New York.

Selected solo show: 2005: "The One & Only," Haswelldeiger & Co. Gallery, New York.

Selected group shows: 2006: "Make Your Own Life," ICA, Philadelphia; "Beware of a Holy Whore," Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York. 2005: "Painters Without Paintings & Paintings Without Painters," Orchard Gallery, New York; The Baltic Triennial 2005, CAC, Vilnius.

