

JESSICA STOCKHOLDER.
CARDINAL DIRECTIONS

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Curatorial text. David Barro

The work of Jessica Stockholder (born in Seattle, United States, 1959 and raised in Vancouver, B.C. Canada) reveals the complex relationship between the illusionistic space of painting and the physical presence of sculpture. Intrigued by the ways things are bounded and by our understanding of them, she explores how numerous materials intersect with the possibilities of painting. This interstitial state also grounds her work in the overlap between installation and architecture, since it is always linked to the site in question. Ultimately, it is about the experience of looking, a kind of abstraction, use of colour or artistic experience projected as a way of communicating the world, driven by the artist's conviction that any image of something can be abstract if we think of it as somehow relating the experience of that thing.

Her practice is paradigmatic of what is termed expanded painting—painting that turns context into content by conquering architectural space and transforming the traditional two dimensions of the canvas into the three dimensions of real space, as well as including the time spectators take to wander through the space without ever finding a definitive viewpoint. This is definitely painting, and in her works we can talk about figure and ground, chiaroscuro, colour, composition, space, rhythm, etc. Everything hints at aspects or concepts of pictorial tradition, even though the materials might be socks, duct tape, a surfboard, a strip of shower curtain, umbrella fabric, a fridge, a Ghanaian mask, a typewriter, weights or a carpet she has designed following her own colour scheme. It is painting as a reality that can be penetrated, inhabited. Yet it also lets us continue to talk about painting, even though in many cases the canvas is architectural space. The use of colour dematerialises things and gives painting its pictorial quality. We see this in her more intimate pieces, assemblages of found, or occasionally purchased, objects whose material qualities have been erased by the impact of colour. Artificial light, as a pictorial strategy, also plays into this intention, further emphasising this effect of colour. Above and beyond painting, the focus is on the pictorial essence of each object and, by extension, the pictorial potential of architectural space, which supports painting as a wall supports a canvas.

With all this in mind, we cannot hope to understand her work without embracing one fundamental premise: colour is always poised to dominate material. Colour plays the role of drawing, perspective, shadow and volume, yet also assumes its symbolic potential, its cultural symbolism. Colours change over time and place, and Stockholder cultivates a physiological relationship with colour, rooted in emotions and certain traditions that endow colour with various meanings. We see it in *Hollow Places Thin & Fat* (2011), where the artist screen-prints shapes and colours while making striking cuts into wooden boards to leave a series of hollows. The wood came from an ailing American ash tree that had grown in The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum's sculpture garden for over a century but which had to be cut down after it became infested by an invasive beetle. The result is not a site-specific piece and marks a departure from her usual materials, though it aligns perfectly with her aims, given its nature as a "situation" and its condition as a palimpsest of memories, sparked by the intense connections she forged with

trees and wood during her childhood on the Pacific coast in the northwestern United States and Canada, where her earliest memories are linked to carved wooden sculptures and totems created by local Indigenous peoples. The natural contours and imperfections of the wood are incorporated as “pictorial” memory, just as the wicker baskets are in *Cardinal Directions* (2025), a site-specific work created for Es Baluard Museu which spectators have to walk around to fully apprehend it, akin to a periscope reminding us that her work is rooted in a continuous decision-making process. If we want to discover the work as a whole, we have to walk. This is also the case in *Assist: Tied to be fit – Middle Period* (2021), where a rope becomes a creeping vine spreading through the exhibition space. This invasive, accidental or serendipitous quality occurs both in creating and in receiving the work, always starting from a conceptual order before embracing the unexpected. As a result, her work can sometimes appear surrealist or Dadaist, though it would be inconceivable without the environmental contribution of minimalism. Thus, the very nature of the material and the object transcends any specific details so that what we see—the surface, the painting—evokes many other spaces and sensations with the power to spill over the very limits of the image and the space that contains it.

Cardinal Directions is a painting that expands painting throughout the exhibition space, turning context into content in several ways. First, it works with real space, which, when painted, functions as both figure and form while remaining a medium. In addition, it incorporates steel cables and marine ropes of different colours that confer cultural value while also empowering themselves as gestures floating in space, like vanishing lines drawn in the air. But, above all, the artist celebrates the traditional symbolic values of local craftsmanship by working closely with Pep Toni Ferrer and Magdalena Vidal, two skilled Mallorcan artisans who have spent over two decades reviving and teaching the tradition of *llatra*, weaving palm leaves into baskets and other handmade objects. With their help, the artist weaves a sort of spider’s web at the heart of the work out of different irregularly woven baskets made by combining different materials—rushes, esparto, grass, cane and wicker—in various forms and sizes.

Once again, Jessica Stockholder incorporates nearby elements that link her work to the surrounding context as naturally as possible, creating threads and connections that capture new forms and ideas to communicate meaning. Above all, though, Stockholder repeatedly probes the boundaries between art and life, as well as between artistic disciplines. The real blurs with the metaphorical, and any surface acquires the illusionistic quality of the pictorial. She sees the world as an unprecedented form, capable of being reinvented by embracing its memory, be it that of an ancient tree or handcrafted baskets that recall ancestral trades. What is collected always carries semantic qualities and forms a language of singularities. All objects tell us stories, and artists, like artisans, are transmitters of a universe of signs and forms repeated through time that give a territory its distinct character. This is also true of colour, which can make an object heavier or lighter. This leads us into the infinite realm of the emotional, a reality that can take us from one order to another, immersing us, as spectators, in an experience that will never be identical and depends on many factors, from the light or sound penetrating our experience to our mood. Jessica Stockholder has often stated that the experience of colour is always relative and changeable. Indeed, her works are fissures in our perception. Painting as a possibility merges with the physical reality of the material, and we must wander around works that never offer a single viewpoint, enabling the performative condition of her painting, which cultivates time and space as volume, while also halting and expanding it when it becomes an image, a pictorial event.

Jessica Stockholder’s painting has always focused on vision, on looking, and on how an image or even an architectural space is defined through the pictorial. Its inciteful power grows inexhaustibly as it disperses. Her painting thus creates its own place, and in this process the factor of time becomes radically important, as painting follows a logic of appearances and sensations, of encounters and perceptions. This is especially true since we, as viewers, are the ones compelled to define the frame and its duration. It is then that we realise how the everyday has

been monumentalised and elevated to another domain through colour. Her work is conceived in colour but presented through the domains of the haptic, the material and its textures, combining the weight and density of forms, its dense essence and humanity, scale, and so forth. Materials and forms are not inherently poetic; they acquire those qualities when they achieve the right resonance, their own brilliance. As architect Peter Zumthor notes, “Material is endless. Take a stone: you can saw it, grind it, drill into it, split it, or polish it—it will become a different thing each time. Then take tiny amounts of the same stone, or huge amounts, and it will turn into something else again. Then hold it up to the light—different again. There are a thousand different possibilities in one material alone.” Jessica Stockholder explores these possibilities of materials and objects through colour, perceiving painting not only as a physical reality that remains constant, but also as an infinitely varying projection that changes as we look and move, creating different perceptual logics in the space that hosts it and gives it meaning.

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