

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ArtSeen

Sturtevant

By Suzanne Hudson



Installation view: *Sturtevant*, Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles, April 13 - June 15, 2024. © Sturtevant Estate. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Spread across Matthew Marks's two sites, *Sturtevant* constellates painting, sculpture, drawing, and video work made by the artist between 1965 and 2004, each piece cherry-picked by the gallery. This presentation comes to the city a decade after Sturtevant's major survey, *Sturtevant: Double Trouble*, had traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles from New York, where it opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 2014, the year of Sturtevant's

ON VIEW

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death at age 89. That retrospective, long overdue, was met with a response suggesting the flush of discovery, by turn compensatory and ecstatic. Yet by November 2022, Zach Hatfield could start an insightful review in *Artforum* by arguing for Sturtevant's work as an "affirmative force" despite the plausibility of negation, with the incipit, "I have nothing new to say about Sturtevant. This feels almost fitting, given the artist's own vexed relationship to newness." An acknowledgment of a boom-bust critical cycle predicated on the originality of response that Sturtevant's work paradoxically affirms, the place of language in the vicinity of the art itself seems very much the point.

Beginning in 1965, when she staged what appeared to be a group show of peers that was instead her first solo exhibition, Sturtevant baited response to work that, as Bruce Hainley describes in the introduction of a 2008 *Afterall* interview with the artist, "reveals the total structures working in the interior of art." As has been well documented, Sturtevant used the tools of other artists to make her own renditions that look much the same as those referents: asking Andy Warhol for the silk screen he used to make his "Flowers" series or chancing upon Frank Stella's discontinued paint in a Manhattan hardware store decades after he had abandoned the black enamel. Like with other recent installations, including the one in New York that Hatfield reviewed at Matthew Marks in 2022, here a Warhol-adjacent garden—the multi-panel *Nine Warhol Flowers* (1965/69), with each of the nine



Sturtevant, *Nine Warhol Flowers*, 1965/69. Synthetic polymer silkscreen and acrylic on 9 individual canvases in artist's frame, 66½ × 66½ inches. © Sturtevant Estate. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Sturtevant, *Johns Target with Four Faces (First Study)*, 1986. Encaustic and collage on canvas, wood, plaster, 34 × 26 1/8 inches. © Sturtevant Estate. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

canvases subdivided into a quadrant of four blooms—anchors a grouping, insisting on reception in a contemporary context that never fails to recall, through repetition, the primacy of its origin as a long-since lost object. *Haring Subway Drawing* (1986), a chalk rendering of a winged mermaid hovering above a water line bobbing with twinned dolphins on black Foamcore, and *Johns Target with Four Faces (First Study)* (1986), an encaustic and collage bull's eye framed with plaster facial casts in those little Johnsian boxes, completes the ensemble alongside it.

In the second building, a shaped canvas covered in aluminum paint, *Stella Luis Miguel Dominguin (First Version)* (1990), got its own room off the entrance. On view when news of Stella's death broke, it assumed a newly memorial tone. Even before, separated from the others, it loomed there, a hardened flag or icon. The structuring presence of absent bodies cannily continues in the larger space. There, the 12 strings of lights comprising *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (America)* (2004) hangs mid-elegy, portending dimming. The tangle frames the two-channel projection, *The Dark Threat of Absence* (2002), on the far wall. Filling this massive expanse, it is truly epic in scale but also

ethos. Sturtevant's is a performance of infinite regress—of Paul McCarthy's performance of Willem de Kooning in *Painter* (1995)—juxtaposed with appropriated commercial advertising, all of which plays across twinned, stuttering screens. The canny but also random associations stack: the bulbous nose of a costume formally reiterating those dangling bulbs, whose cords serendipitously layered atop footage of spaghetti. Text swims in the darkness. One memorable line in the loop, a perfect encapsulation of debt as homage but also the confounding transactions of capital, asks, "How much money do you owe me?"

Taken together these pieces evidence the material range Sturtevant exploited, even within the controlled format of panel painting hugging the walls. Details matter. Tracing Sturtevant's lines of paint, they betray slight shifts in weight or pressure of application, the span of the artist's reach. *Johns Target with Four Faces (First Study)* in particular poses the limits of what can be exhumed for Sturtevant as well as for us, and what those gaps come to mean. Sturtevant didn't seek out archival material to match Johns's newsprint grounds but built the encaustic up from what was available when she was working (a system that she narrated as deriving predominantly from memory, using a technique that far from obviated errors); no need for the fetish of perfect similitude. Recent scholarship in the humanities has embraced something similar called the reconstructive method, effectively recovering how an artwork was made a form of embodied knowledge. This reverse-engineering might be applied to a painting or a score, with a goal not to produce a mimic but a solidarity of becoming that, because experiential, can never be its equivalent. As for Sturtevant, her project had already posed the tool as an epistemological consort, raising, still, questions about the apposition and ends of process instead of assuming its end as inevitability.

Contributor

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