

Not To The Sensual Ear, But, More Endear'd

“Ostraca” (from the ancient Greek) are pieces, or fragments, of a whole. Specifically, the word refers to the shards of pottery used to cast a vote against a member of the community of Athens to be sent into long-term temporary exile (ostracized). After the vote was counted, what happened to the spent ostraca? One must imagine that they were discarded, no longer of use, meeting the same fate that they once meted out. They became remnants.

In this newest body of work on view in *Everyday Ostraca*, Maha Saab is rebuilding the shattered vessels, rebuilding new vessels, with the remnants from her daily activities. Beginning with found images of nature, acquaintances or striking faces from the web, Saab has rendered the visages unreadable. There are images of people as well as fauna and objects that she has encountered only to immediately pass by. She momentarily rescues these distant, fleeting images and immediately sends them back into exile. There is a prominence, perhaps even dignity, in ostracism—one has been selected, highlighted, given their 15 minutes of fame—before being cast out and eventually recalled only as a fleeting recollection. As if re-enacting this capricious community process, Saab selected, and drew attention to her selection, by photographic, printing, painting, carving the image, then exiled any recognizable subject while retaining moments of allusion.

Though not the only concern, shattered lives are the foundation, metaphorically and literally, for these works. Saab identifies only one historical sensation, Ida Rubinstein, the storied ballerina of the Ballet Russe. Rubenstein, born to a wealthy Polish Jewish family in 1885, was orphaned at a young age. She was known to have numerous affairs with men and women and was considered a sensation more for her activity off of the stage than on. Later in life, she converted to Roman Catholicism but still had to flee Nazi France in 1940. Other sources are from social media or image of friends of friends. The large group of sculptural works reference a spider that Saab encountered tangled in its own web in the corner of her studio. The immediate impulse when coming upon such a form is to immediately discard it. Saab renders it with grace and dignity in reference to the styles of Louise Bourgeois and Alberto Giacometti. Mathematical factors of two were used to measure the lengths of the parts to create graceful symmetry related to the golden ratio.

Saab is not only concerned with the context of the work that her exhibition title elucidates. She is an artist fully absorbed in the history of art, both technical and conceptual. Her materials and technique can also be read as remains from art history. For example, Alan Saret comes to mind whenever metal mesh is used. But, Saret uses mesh to build volume out of nearly transparent materials; Saab, on the other hand, uses the material to flatten. The ostraca is repurposed and rebuilt. The mesh overlaying the evidently layered surface of Saab’s paintings serves as a screen — I see the mesh holes as pixels — to contain and to frame. The fact that the scrim continues beyond the picture plane does not discount my argument; it just helps to confuse the lines between the screen and our physical space and reality. Though Saab consciously erases the reference to digital media in the beginning of her process, she eventually returns to the contrast between the hand and technology through her layering of paint and use of found and mass-produced materials.

John McCracken, Philip Guston, Moira Dryer, Clyfford Still, maybe even Rauschenberg, and Johns, all come to mind. Though it is the surfaces of the work that bring all of Saab’s predecessors into the conversation, it is the uncomfortable relationship of the life of an artist that unites them in the end. All those mentioned — and so many more — approached their work with consideration of the remnants of everyday life. Careers themselves work in cycles and no one artist, material, narrative, human being, are immune to the possibility of ostracism. The humanity and the humility of Saab’s work is that memories will remain.

- Lily Siegel