

HERE COMES THE RAINBOW

LESLIE BAUM



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Justin Witte, Gallery director

## On my last visit to Leslie Baum's West Chicago studio she had her

“this&that” stoneware sculptures leaning against the East wall of the newly constructed space. The angle of the pieces were reflected by a nearby post that came out of the floor and rose to the ceiling at a 45 degree angle, creating a giant wooden V. In contrast to the hard edges of the stoneware, the surface of the wood was soft from recent sandblasting. The horizontal lines running across the surface of one of her un-stretched paintings laying on the floor was mimicked by large beams in the ceiling that were set just a few inches apart, apparently to support industrial machinery that has long since been removed. There was a rise in a section of the floor that someone had tried to grind down, but gave up halfway through leaving a plateaued bump, a converse to the indentations on

the surface of her works on paper that have circles, triangles and whale tails pressed into them. The intense color from these same works on paper caused the hair of the artist standing in front of them to change color and glow.

Walking through Baum's exhibition in the Cleve Carney Art Gallery, like walking through her studio, a slow and attentive viewing of the work rewards the viewer with a meditative mindset. The heightened awareness of color and material present in this precise installation extends to the space itself. The architecture, light and sounds of the space are revealed along with the edges of the canvas, reflected colors and weave of the paper. The title of this exhibition declares “*Here Comes The Rainbow*,” but the truth that this exhibition reminds us of is that the full spectrum of the rainbow is already here, we just have to slow down to notice it. In the current climate it is easy to lose connection with the moment. *Here Comes the Rainbow* provides a welcome respite at a moment when our world is being defined in monochrome. All I can say is, bring on the rainbow! □









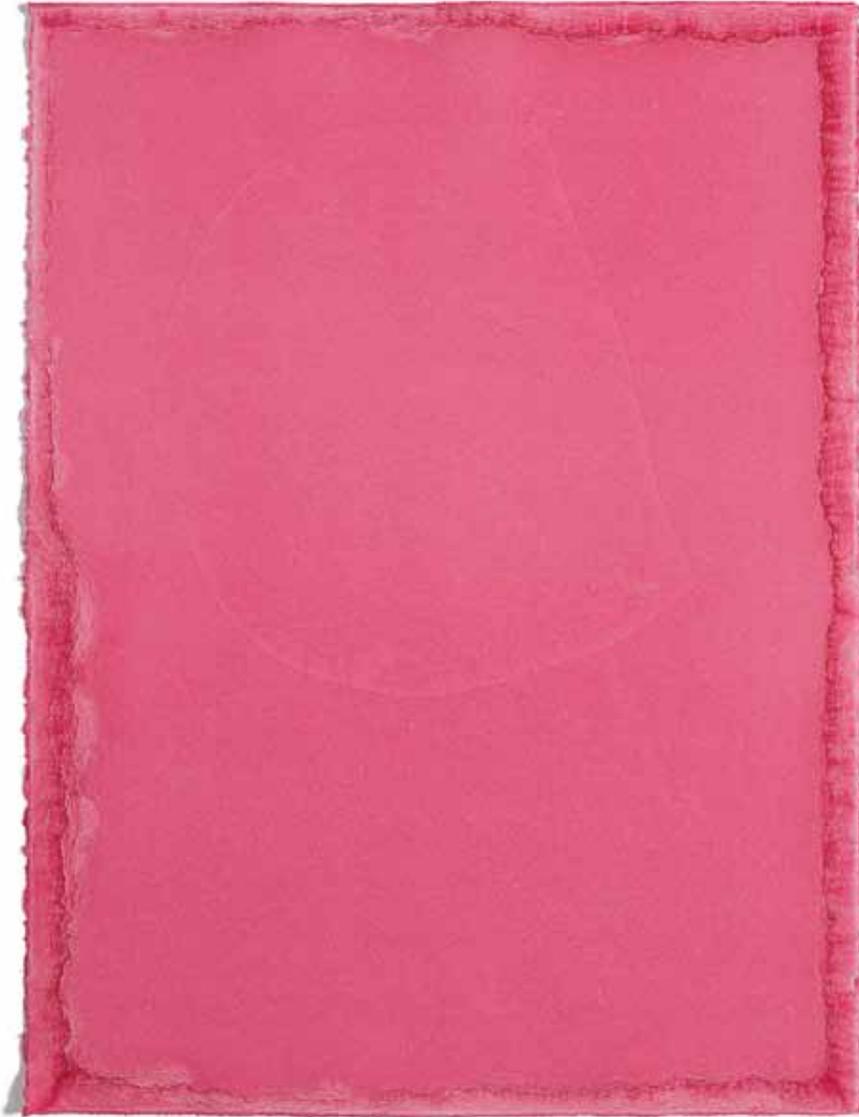
John Yau

## Leslie Baum calls herself a painter, but that hardly covers what she does.

She is not wedded to a particular material or process. Her interest in remaking the same form (or, more precisely, silhouette) as a shaped canvas, on a sheet of embossed paper, or into a piece of ceramic arises from her curiosity about the relationship between perception and apprehension—how we see what we see—while her use of different mediums expands the historical definition of painting. Contrary to the road taken by many of her contemporaries, Baum is a painter interested in the possibilities of installation, rather than an installation artist interested in incorporating painting into her work.

The title of Baum's latest body of work is *Here Comes the Rainbow*. Baum chose the title because she decided to limit her

palette to the seven spectral hues found in a rainbow. As we know, the seven hues are derived from a single source, light; they are the many that emerges from one. Or, to put it another way, the seven hues are fragments which, combined, make something larger than the sum of its parts. This simple scientific fact is just one of the meanings the installation embodies.



The most important twist to this particular project is her decision to match the seven hues of the rainbow with seven distinct silhouettes, which she derived from different sources. According to Baum, the seven shapes can be defined as a circle; a snowman; a plant sprout or a whale tail; a wedge; a column; an arch or rainbow; an equilateral triangle. She lifted five of the shapes (the circle, the sprout/tail, the wedge, the column, and the arch) from the work of other artists (Ellsworth Kelly, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ben Nicholson, Fernand Léger, and Sonia Delaunay). The equilateral triangle, which Baum considers a true universal shape, comes from geometry. The seventh silhouette, a "snowman," is

hers. She wanted her voice to be one among the others, which folds another meaning into the work. Each of the shapes is painted a single hue, an exercise in monochrome that links her further to the work of Ellsworth Kelly.

Baum's group of signs constitutes an impure visual language that is open to interpretation. One also discerns morphological connections between the arch, triangle, circle, and wedge, for example, as well as between the wedge, column, and snowman. Prolonged looking will likely reveal other alignments and associations.

Even where we cannot guess the motivation, it is clear that Baum was not arbitrary in her choice of shape, because it is possible to imagine each form transforming itself into another in the set. These transformations lend yet another level of meaning to *Here Comes the Rainbow*: just as sunlight is never the same, change is constant.

Together, the seven monochrome shapes (or silhouettes) evoke the seasons, the landscape, plant life, atmospheric phenom-

ena, architecture, pure mathematics, and sculpture. The aspects of reality they convey are manmade and natural, concrete and ephemeral. By picking shapes that can be read in multiple, contradictory ways – such as the plant sprout that is also a whale tail, or the arch that is also a rainbow – Baum underscores reality's constant motion, as well as the ethereality of experience. Even though they have a similar shape, it is one thing to encounter an arch and another to witness

a rainbow. What they do share is their ability to join one place to another, to connect two distant points, as well as – like the column – rise up from the ground.

In Baum's work, the relationship between hue and shape is fixed. The whale's tail/plant sprout is always green, while the circular shape is always red. Do we read the latter shape as a red sun, or as a glowing boulder? Suppose she places it on the floor, rather than the wall? What names will we give a particular form, and how will that effect our reading of the other shapes? Baum recognizes that her pairing of shape and color influences our reading of her works, but she does not want to fix it.







Paradoxes abound in Baum's shapes. Call it evidence of her playfulness that a whale's tail resembles the stalk of a plant with two leaves sprouting from its top. We are invited to speculate upon such facts, aware that there is no final meaning to be arrived at, that the work is not a puzzle to be solved. Does the desire to know and name everything circumscribe our experience of reality? What is the relationship between naming and not naming (that is to say, between thought and experience)? Is naming a way of stepping back from experience or moving closer to it? These are just some of the many questions animating Baum's installation.

Baum uses her vocabulary of shapes and hues to generate different bodies of work, each in a different medium and scale, ranging from intimate to monumental. Although she routinely uses a scale model of the exhibition space, she always makes the final decisions regarding the placement of her unstretched, shaped canvases, her embossed sheets of paper, her ceramics and other elements during the process of installing them in the actual room. She wants to choreograph the viewer's experience without becoming didactic or simplistic.



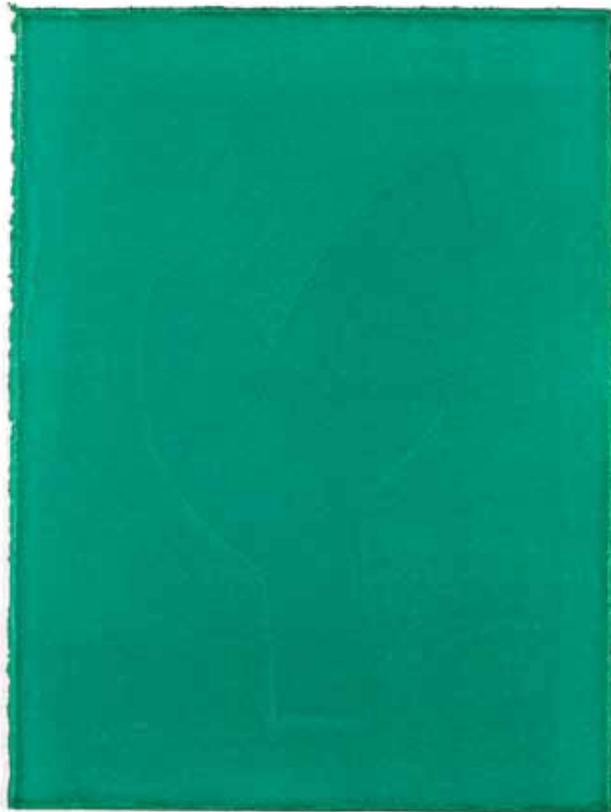
For *Here Comes the Rainbow*, Baum uses shaped canvases, sheets of embossed paper, painted pillows, and stoneware ceramics as groups of installation components based on her seven forms. The largest of these are the unstretched, monochromatic canvases, which the artist affixes directly to the wall. Already larger than human scale, these shapes can change in size, stretching from floor to ceiling, if the artist chooses. Baum paints on both sides of the canvas, emphasizing that it is an

object, not just a flat surface on which to deposit paint. In the shaped canvases, as well as the embossed sheets of paper and the ceramic pieces, the edge is just as important as the surface.

In the second group, the embossed paper, the silhouette is made by running the paper through a press with a piece of carefully cut canvas on top. There are five sheets of paper for each shape, all of which measure 30 by 22 inches, and the placement of the silhouette changes from sheet to sheet. Each set of five is a single color, but the hue is slightly different from its mates, so that no two yellows or reds are alike.





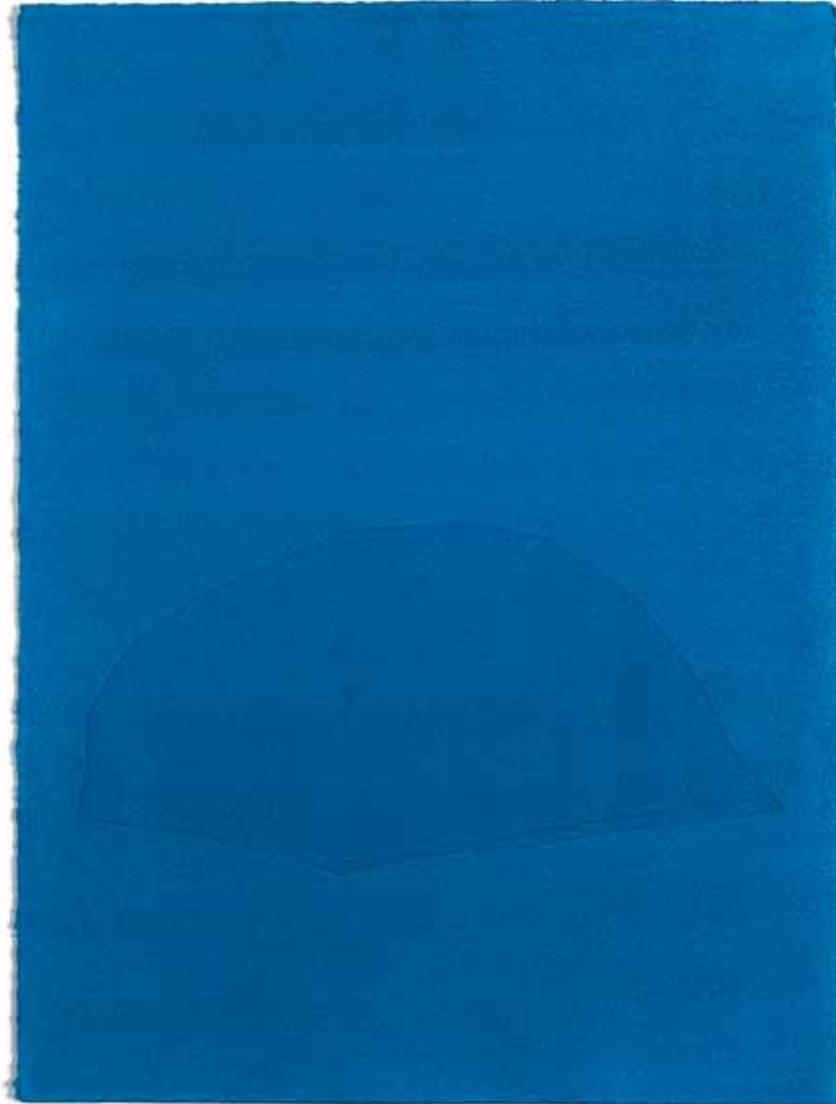






Like the shaped canvases, Baum treats the sheets of paper as objects, painting one side with the expectation that the color will seep through. The hue changes slightly throughout the surface. She pays particular attention to the painting of the paper's edges, which further emphasizes that these works are a group of related things, rather than flat surfaces. In the installation, she lines up the sheets of paper in a row without any space between them. The distribution of the hues vary from sheet to sheet, reminding us that light is continually changing.

The third group is a set of meditation pillows, or what the artist calls "puffy paintings," which are placed on the floor of the installation. The largest is 29 by 18 by 5 inches. Viewers are invited to sit on the pillows, which place them at a different angle to the work from the perspective typically expected at an exhibition, where people stand and move about. Sitting and looking lead us to reflect upon what is being scrutinized: we enter a state of enforced stillness that evokes the possibility of being both inside and outside the experience, of being able to look as well as contemplate one's looking. It is also about slowing down time,

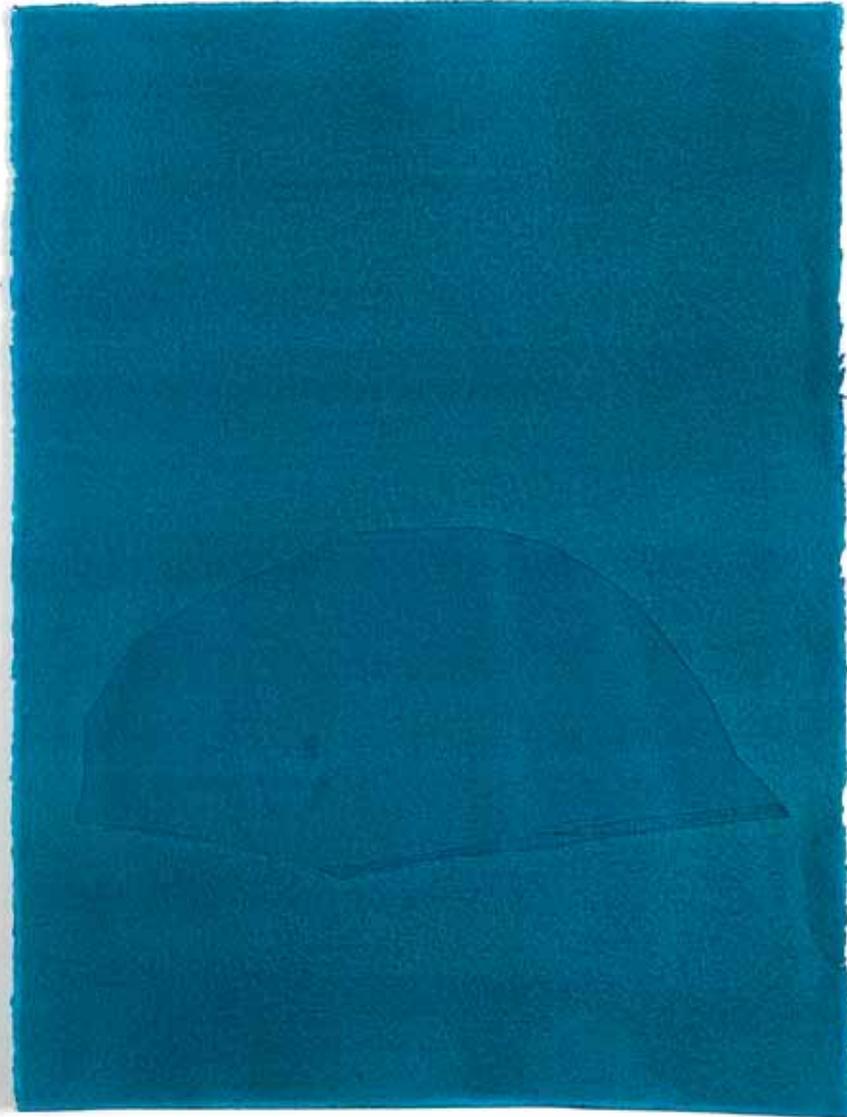


taking apart and putting together one's experience, which unfolds differently in different parts of the gallery.

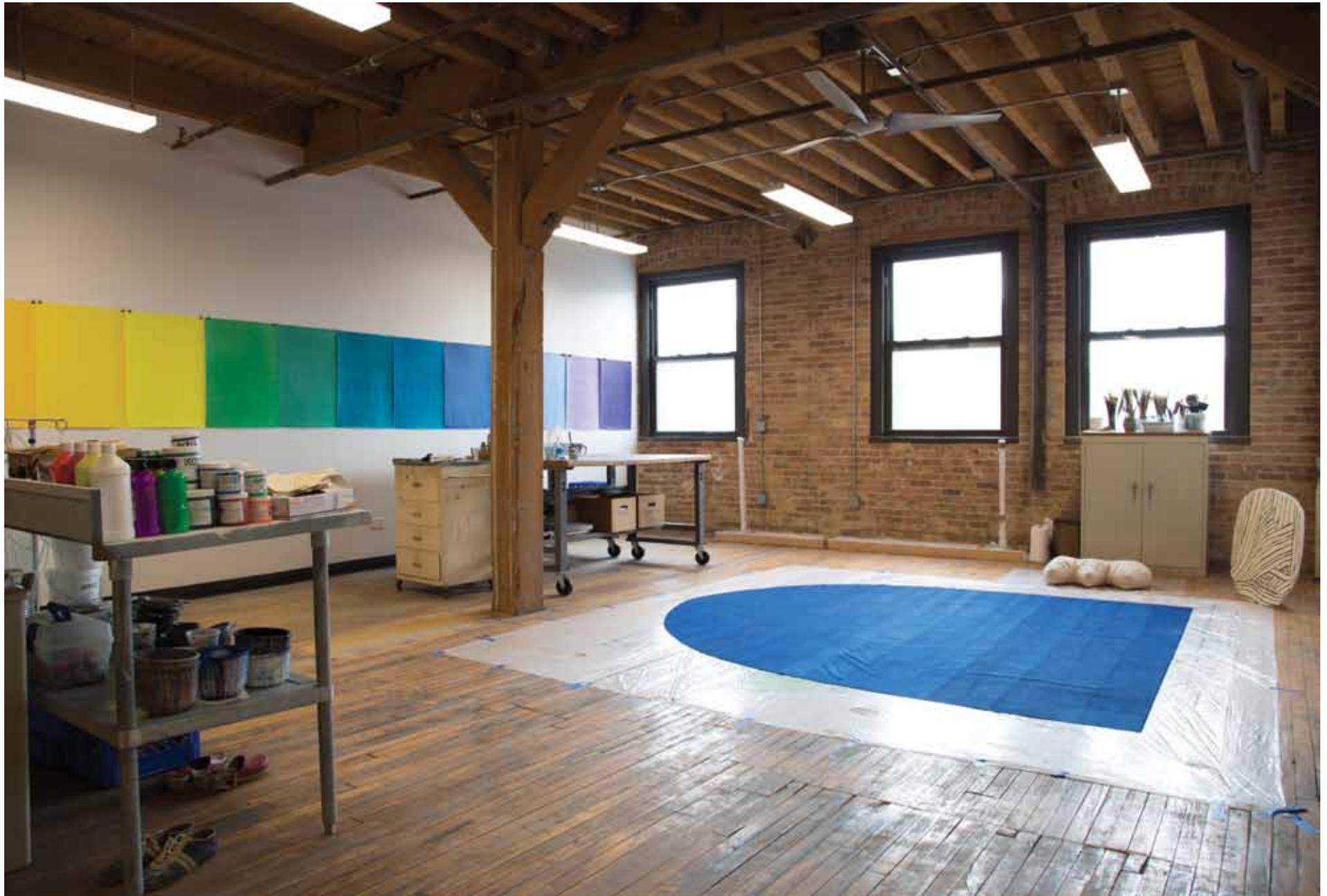
The fourth group of seven shapes consists of flat pieces of stoneware that have been spray-painted on one side and glazed on the other. Here, as with the shaped canvases and embossed paper, Baum is attentive to the edges of the forms. The sides and edges that have been spray-painted face the wall, while the unpainted, glazed sides are turned toward the room. These shapes, ranging

in height from 5 to 12 inches, are placed on a canvas-wrapped shelf. Because the sides and edges turned away from the room are painted, with the glow of their color reflected on the wall, it is likely that viewers will be curious and move closer to the shelf.

In the canvas and paper works that are affixed to the wall, or, in the case of the ceramics, leaning on a shelf against the wall, we experience color, light, and form differently. Although Baum limits her palette and shapes to seven, she opens the viewers' experience, foregrounding what they already know – the variety of ways







that light and color manifest themselves – but which they are not necessarily conscious of at the time.

In these four groups, Baum parses the work of art's relationship to its environment: flat against the wall; leaning against the wall; or freestanding. At the same time, by inviting viewers to sit on her pillows (or freestanding paintings) she undermines art's status as something to be looked at but not touched.

In addition to these groups, she has made a pair of identical paintings that seems to combine Alma Thomas's lattice of bright colors with a Georgia O'Keeffe watercolor of a blue grid. We see a triangle filled with facets of red, yellow, and blue juxtaposed against a largely blue ground in which an uneven grid of paint is visible. Baum deliberately chose these two vocabularies because Thomas's refers to spectral light, while O'Keeffe's refers to nocturnal light – a nighttime sky over the Texas prairie. After completing these identical paintings, Baum covered one with a coat of white paint, so that the image peeks through a porous white veil.

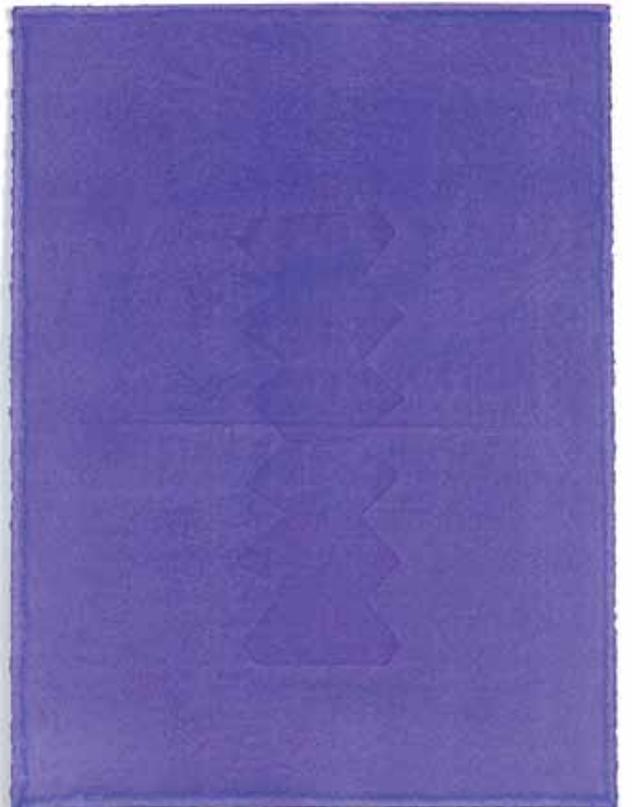
Finally, Baum is thinking of placing wood panel (the circle-shape) on the gallery's

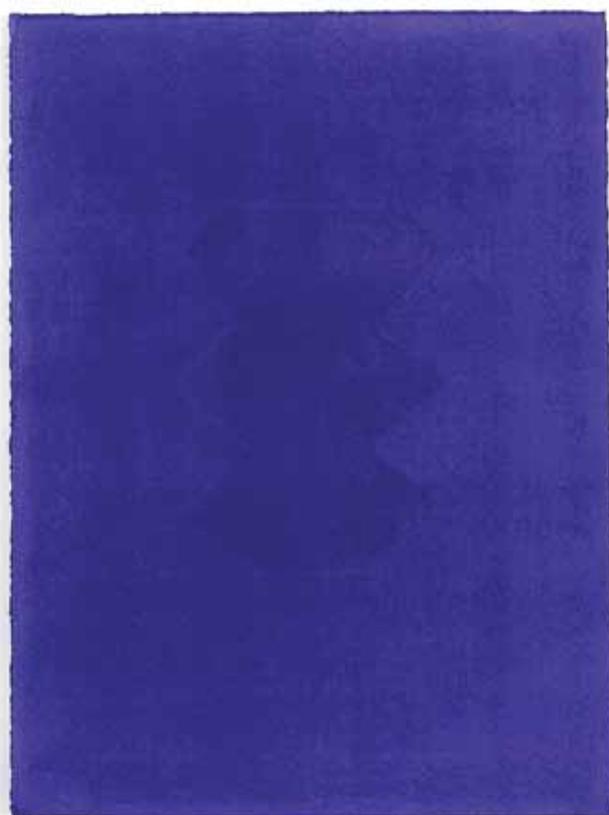
patio, connecting the outside world to the work inside. In contrast to the flat stoneware on the shelf, leaning against the wall, the panel is freestanding, with black lines partitioning the gessoed surface like an abstraction of strands of woven threads or tall grasses. It invites as well as resists interpretation.

From the texture of the embossed paper to the smooth, glazed stoneware, there is in all of Baum's works a celebration of materiality's presence, and its interaction with color and light. It is a world that is simultaneously elemental and joyful, with sequences of shape and hue inviting viewers to sit, think, look closely, and, perhaps more importantly, daydream. One of the things I find striking about Baum's *Here Comes the Rainbow* is its ability to return us to a state of innocent looking driven by curiosity. As the title suggests, the rainbow's arrival is inevitable. So is change. That Baum can imply political and social content in her work without ever spelling it out or becoming didactic is a remarkable achievement in these troubled, troubling times. Instead of telling us how the future must be, she offers the viewer the very real pleasure of looking, thinking, and discovering. □













































## List of works

Inside cover:  
*shape of the day: a.t, g.o*  
2017

oil and acrylic on canvas  
20 in. x 17 in.

image by Lara Kastner

pp. 2 & 3:  
*this & that: white light*  
2017

glaze & spray paint on stoneware  
14 in. x 140 in.

images by Lara Kastner

pp. 6 & 7:  
Installation view  
of Leslie Baum's studio  
2017

image by Lara Kastner

pp. 8 & 9:  
*echo: red 1-6*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

images by Clare Britt

p. 10:  
*echo: red7, 2017*  
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24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

p. 11:  
*echo: red8*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

pp. 12 & 13:  
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2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

images by Clare Britt

p. 14:  
*echo: orange 1*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

p. 15:  
*echo: orange 2*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

pp. 16 & 17:  
*echo: green 1-5*  
*echo: blue1 2017*  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

images by Clare Britt

pp. 18 & 19:  
*echo: indigo 1-6*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

images by Clare Britt

p. 20:  
*echo: blue 2 2017*  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

p. 21:  
*echo: blue 3, 2017*  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

p. 23:  
Leslie Baum's Studio  
2017

image by Lara Kastner

p. 24:  
*echo: indigo 7*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

p. 25:  
*echo: indigo 8*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

image by Clare Britt

pp. 26 & 27:  
*echo: violet 1-6*  
2017  
acrylic paint on embossed paper  
24 in. x 18 in.

images by Clare Britt

pp. 28 & 29:  
Leslie Baum's Studio  
2017

images by Lara Kastner

pp. 30 & 31:  
*this & that: white light*  
2017  
glaze and spray paint  
on stoneware  
detail

images by Lara Kastner

pp. 32 & 33:  
*this&that: white light*  
2017  
glaze and spray paint on stoneware  
detail

images by Lara Kastner

p. 35:  
*this & that: white light*  
2017  
glaze and spray paint on stoneware  
detail

image by Lara Kastner

pp. 36 & 37:  
*this & that: white light*  
2017  
glaze & spray paint on stoneware  
14 in. x 140 in.

images by Lara Kastner

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Leslie Baum's Studio  
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image by Lara Kastner

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pp. 44 & 45:  
Leslie Baum's Studio  
2017

images by Lara Kastner

Back inside cover:  
*shape of the day: a.t*  
*g.o: white light*  
2017

oil and acrylic on canvas  
20 in. x 17 in.

image by Lara Kastner

## Biographies

**LESLIE BAUM** has exhibited her work extensively both nationally and internationally. Recent exhibitions include *Excuse Me if I Get Too Deep* at Geary Contemporary in NYC, *mountain and SEA* at SXU Gallery, *MOUNTAIN and sea* at 4th Ward Project Space, *Drunken Geometry* at Devening Projects + Editions, *Souvenirs From Wonderland* at Miami University of Ohio's Hiestand Galleries, *co-conspirators and the possibilities of painting in a parrallel universe* at Hap Gallery in Portland OR and *100 Painters of Tomorrow*, One Art Space NYC. Her work can be found in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Elmhurst Art Museum, and the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and Von Voigtlander Women's Hospital. Her work has been reviewed extensively including in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Hyperallergic*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. She has been awarded residencies from Yaddo and the Vermont Studio Center. Leslie Baum lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

**JOHN YAU** is a poet and critic based in New York City. Yau has published over 50 books and has served as the editor for the *Brooklyn Rail* and Hyperallergic Weekend. Yau also runs the small press Black Square Editions. Yau is the recipient of grants and awards from Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation, the Academy of American Poets (Lavan Award), *The American Poetry Review* (Jerome Shestack Award), the Ingram Merrill Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the General Electric Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

This publication accompanies the exhibit *Leslie Baum, Here Comes The Rainbow*.

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Leslie Baum would like to thank Clare Britt and Lara Kastner for photographing her work for this catalogue, John Yau for his thoughtful essay, Carlos Gomez for his assistance in producing irregular shaped pillows, and Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi of Sonnenzimmer for their work designing this catalogue. She also would like to thank Lillstreet Art Center for their assistance in creating the ceramic work for the show and Stan Shellabarger and Angie Lennard of Spudnik Press for their guidance and expertise in printmaking.

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