

Intimacy Composed: The Paintings of Sarah Canright
—Bethany Johnson

In this expansive exhibition, Sarah Canright presents paintings from her ongoing exploration of—almost exclusively—the greyhound as compositional form and psychological subject. Canright constructs her compositions with the dogs' twisting bodies and limbs, producing works that are as visually eloquent as they are psychologically stirring. These paintings embrace the visual subtlety and emotional depth of oil on canvas, while also embodying the intimacy and immediacy of drawing.

Canright came of age when the Chicago Imagists were attracting attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Imagists were a loose collection of artists—including Ed Paschke, Jim Nutt, Barbara Rossi, Karl Wirsum and Ed Flood—who all attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, graduated within a few years of each other and shared a funky sensibility, an affection for popular imagery, and a great respect for drawing. Although associated with this group of artists, Canright was more involved in breaking down the image, and soon became deeply invested in abstraction. She now creates works that straddle representation and abstraction, and the alchemical fusion between the two generates a conceptual flexibility, emotional intensity and visual complexity all her own.

Canright's twisting greyhounds give the impression of an abstract gesture brought into focus. From a distance, the dogs' curves read as fast, sweeping, physical gestures, while closer examination reveals careful, tender, detailed renderings of a recognizable—while somewhat alien—subject. Her paintings appear simultaneously calculating and impulsive, representational but intangible, eerily sterile but also deeply, profoundly emotional. The bleached palette, selective detail and nonrepresentational color abstract the images, highlighting sensitive formal choices; on the other hand, the greyhounds themselves, still legible despite their translation, lend the compositions crucial metaphorical, psychological and autobiographical content.

Canright first took up the greyhound as subject after the death of her own in the spring of 2000. As is so often the case, what began as a personal, impulsive activity in the studio—in her case, one of mourning—quickly evolved into a rich and poetic body of work. The greyhound's taut musculature and wiry frame is powerful and aerodynamic; they are bred for functionality and for speed. In Canright's images, however, the dogs' bodies form languid curves and twisted contortions that suggest inactivity, or even further, dysfunction or death. Just as the compositions operate both literally and abstractly, the dogs themselves simultaneously suggest strength and weakness, rest and unrest, vitality and mortality. Viewed either as human companion or human stand-in, the animals beautifully embody both our greatest joys and our deepest anxieties.

Despite the apparent representational clarity of Canright's paintings, the ambiguity in them lends emotional complexity and conceptual flexibility to the works. Specifically, questions about the identity of the animal and the relationship between its various iterations complicate our reading of, and physical relationship to, the images. In works with multiple images of the dog—as in the painting *Festivities*—the animals' torsos and limbs entwine, overlap and tangle; their bodies sometimes seem fused together, as if they were a single organism. Also, the bleached and simplified forms prevent any definitive differentiation between the dogs—neither within nor between paintings—as specific, unique individuals. The repetition of the greyhound across the many paintings could therefore represent both a careful meditation upon a specific life, as well as an exploration of the repetitiveness, beauty and terror of biology. In their ethereal form and immaterial environment, the greyhounds could be seen simply as symbolic embodiments of our shared experience, from the vitality of birth through dysfunction and death.

Despite the graphic quality of the renderings, Canright's paintings invite slow, studied viewing. The forms are described in very high contrast: the paintings generally contain a narrow range of both darks and lights, with the middle values largely absent. Rather than offering a quick read, however, this high-contrast palette complicates the viewing in several ways, and also reveals Canright's more abstract tendencies. First, the rapid transitions from a dark edge into the interior of a form flattens the subject and creates a close relationship (of both value and surface) between the form and the surrounding ground, thereby undermining a form's immediate legibility. Second, the paintings offer tender, subtle shifts in color and temperature within each extreme in value. Perceiving these rewarding nuances, however, proves optically challenging, as one's eyes must adjust to the dark range, then the bleached light values, and back again. These formal complications help enforce the slowness and care in viewing that the psychological intensity of the content also demands.

The uneasiness evoked by Canright's contorted greyhounds is reinforced by the images' deliberate lack of perspectival clarity. Although each dog is very specifically rendered, the intentional absence of environmental context or ground plane prevents any one definitive understanding of either the dog's or the viewer's position. In *State of Grace* (2007), for example, Canright includes concentric circles in the background to activate the space and reinforce the curves of the dogs; perfect circles, however, offer no information about the space that the animals are occupying. As one visually explores the painting, limbs shift orientation, planes tilt slightly and points of view change; the twists and contortions are therefore not only static and compositional, but are embedded dynamically in the viewer's experience of the images.

Canright has always been conscious that her work could be construed as gender-based, specifically in her selection of her beloved dog as a subject. Yet she neither shies away from domestic and feminine implications, nor does she overtly promote them. Instead, she simply embraces the qualities that engage her: tenderness, emotiveness, and quietness, conveyed through the use of light colors that suggest an overexposed image. While her paintings initially attract attention due to her exquisite compositions and formal inventiveness, this attention is retained by the images' psychological depth. Her paintings are canny, closely observed individual portraits that expand into profound metaphors for universal, existential truths. They present a poetic, layered exploration of our most fundamental concerns: life, death, and most of all, love.

The writer, **Bethany Johnson**, is an artist and recent graduate from the MFA painting program at the University of Texas at Austin. She currently lives and works in Austin, Texas.

The mentor, **Peter Plagens**, is a painter who has shown with the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York City since 1974, and was also the staff art critic for *Newsweek* (1989-2003). He has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Arts Journalism Program. Plagens is the author of two books of art criticism- *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-70* (University of California Press, 2000) and *Moonlight Blues: An Artist's Art Criticism* (UMI Research Press, 1986)-as well as a novel, *Time for Robo* (Black Heron Press, 1999). His book on the artist Bruce Nauman will be published by Phaidon, Inc., in 2012. He lives in New York City with his wife, the painter Laurie Fendrich.