Summer Wheat by Tina Kukielski

Inheritance, 2016, medium-density fiberboard, acrylic paint, and drywall, 72 × 46 inches. Images courtesy of the artist.

56 *Rainbow Arcade*, 2016, enamel paint and resin on Mylar, 138 × 41 inches.

Over the past century, painters have pushed their practice in seemingly every possible creative direction—applying paint with all imaginable tools and body parts, and on every conceivable support, resulting in a host of diverse and innovative images, environments, and performative moments. So it's startling and gratifying when we encounter still uncharted territory. Several years ago, looking for a way to paint like a sculptor, Summer Wheat discovered a novel technique that employs paint rather like clay yet achieves a surface reminiscent of tapestries. As she presses thickened acrylic paint through a framed aluminum mesh, the artist works the back and front of a painting simultaneously. Raking the material through the metal screen creates a fiber-like texture that also evokes a pixilated image.

Wheat's large-scale works are dense and dynamic narrations depicting mostly women and revealing a wealth of historical influences—from Ancient Egyptian murals to Native American textiles to genre painting and modernism. One of her signature works, *Strawberry Sun*, a six-by-twelve-foot *Guernica*-like composition from 2016, brings together deities and laborers, cartoon elements and fertility symbols, in a playful mix of figuration and abstraction. On the eve of two upcoming exhibitions this spring, Wheat spoke with ART21's Tina Kukielski about her practice.

TINA KUKIELSKI I'm going to start with the most obvious question: Where does your name come from?

SUMMER WHEAT It's not very poetic, actually. I was going to be named Angela. After I was born my mom was in the recovery room and a soap opera was playing on TV. As the credits rolled she saw one of the actresses was named Summer and drew a connection. It took three days for my parents to sign the birth certificate because they were wavering.

TK Wheat is your real last name?

SW Yes.

TK And you were born in Oklahoma?

SW Oklahoma City.

TK In our preliminary conversations, you often spoke about the place you grew up—the visual culture you were surrounded by and its influence on the evolution of your personal artistic style.

SW A lot of the images I had around me growing up were from Native American artists and depicted scenes of indigenous life. I didn't have much exposure to Western art history. When I drew at home and in art classes, the references I had access to were from Native American books or magazines.

TK When I think of Native American influences, what comes to mind are pattern and rhythm, and those being modes for symbolism. Would you say you had an early insight into decoding that type of visual information?

SW I was interested in the charge within the psychedelic color schemes and repetitive patterns. The nature of the images seemed imbued with a confrontational, visceral energy. My early experience of art was incredibly fortunate because it led me into a rich world of imagery. The repetitive forms in Native American blankets, for instance Navajo weaving patterns, are entrancing, and drawing them became an act of meditation for me. I remember looking at them as a young kid and, using Prismacolor pencils and a piece of paper, trying to decipher the logic of how these forms fit together.

TK Thinking of your narratives and themes, I see references ranging from Ancient Egypt to the Northern Renaissance and beyond.

SW In 2014, I started to introduce a broader range of historical references to my practice, building immersive environments with objects made of paint. I cast paint into the form of tiles, shoes, and everyday objects. Researching artifacts from the past, I became interested in the role of stained glass as a tool for education in the Middle Ages. Because at that time most people were unable to read, biblical stories were told through the illuminated windows of churches. In my installation *Rainbow Arcade* (2016), I interpreted the stained-glass presentation but using ordinary objects from daily life: shoes, cups, beans, combs—things that would be found in any era or culture.

TK Is it real stained glass?

SW No. The work was made with paper cutouts, resin, and enamel paint. I created the patterns with stencils inspired by a plastic lace tablecloth found at a dollar store. I liked the idea of integrating these silhouettes of everyday objects in a pattern reminiscent of luxurious seventeenth-century lace but inspired by a dollar-store item.

TK There seems to be this strong polarity in your work between a perspective leaning toward the domestic and the vernacular and then this more historical and epic approach evoking genre painting and sweeping narratives. How do you see these two poles interacting in your work?

SW The narrative choices are a result of my interest in materials. In terms of materiality, I think of my work as an adventure-seeking pursuit where I'm trying to bring innovation to the materials themselves. I like jumping into new territories. When I noticed I was gravitating

toward using materials in unorthodox ways, I decided the themes of the work needed to be rooted in familiar subject matter. The references and archetypes in my paintings revolve around depictions of daily life, which has always been a fundamental part of visual art.

TK *Inheritance* (2016) is a kind of faux kitchen shelf. The objects are the negative space, almost like a fading memory. The work's title made me think of dishes our grandmothers might give us. You don't really want them, but you have to keep them. So you hang on to them for a couple of years before they end up at the thrift store or on eBay. But I could also see the dishes being your most valued objects. To me, as representations of domesticity, they're two-sided.

SW It's this strange dilemma. People often inherit sets of china as part of a tradition, but there's really no use for them anymore. Or could there be? It's fascinating to think that an inheritance like this was once so precious and highly regarded, and now it might simply end up at a thrift store. The idea of value is important to me, in both the content and the materials of my practice.

With *Inheritance*, I was interested in visual dimensionality. A dish or bowl conveys a sense of fragility and hardness at the same time. I made low-relief cutouts of kitchenware in MDF board. On the wall, the positive shapes around them cast shadows, which created the optical effect of the dishes appearing both flat and round.

TK Many of your works deal with the symbolic role of the objects and tools surrounding us. But there is also representation of labor. Your long horizontal paintings are densely populated, mostly by women. And there's this immense push and pull between foreground and background. There may be several narratives, but they all collapse into one. How do these depictions of groups of women function?

SW Last year, I made a series of paintings and sculptures that were shown in an exhibition called *Noble Metal*. The title refers to a type of metal that resists corrosion and oxidation. This notion served me as the conceptual backbone for the fictitious world that I created around these women. In the painting *Bread Winners* (2016), for instance, there's a long line of women who carry goods on their heads through a star-filled night. The figures were inspired by Egyptian pictography—images of men pouring water, cutting fish, and pushing carts. I wanted to put a woman into the breadwinner's place, stereotypically a male role. With the metallic colors, I sought to evoke the use of metal in these women's daily tasks, but gold, silver, and copper also speak to the binding strength of this empowered female community. The women are connected by geometric patterns that echo the psychological space of supporting one another. The outline of a head of hair might morph into the shape of a shoe, signaling the urgency to unite and work together.

TK When I first saw your paintings, I thought they were drawings because the line is so prominent. What importance does drawing have in your work?

SW The line is the most crucial element in my practice. I connect to Mondrian's idea of the inside of his parallel lines being spaces of infinity. All of my drawings start with a series of automatic line exercises and go through many stages before I arrive at a summation of marks that captures both an abstract thought and a concise rendering of a moment.

In my late twenties, I made drawings on cash register tape, enjoying the continuous work surface and how the format resembled an ancient scroll. I was struck by the scroll's presentation of value, shifting from its origin as a surface for spiritual records to something now used in our daily life as a record of economy.

From a distance these tape drawings looked like abstract patterns, sometimes evoking embroidery or hieroglyphs. Upon closer inspection though, you would see the shape of a hot dog transform into a chromosome, then into a nose or a foot. For me, the drawings had an enigmatic value. I carried this scroll around everywhere I went, documenting my observations, like a daily account. At the time, I was looking closely at painters like George Condo and Carroll Dunham. I was interested in how their interpretation of abstract expressionism employed cartoon elements.

Now I make drawings in my bedroom. I prefer that more intimate space to my studio for drawing. Typically, I make several sketches for a series of paintings, and sometimes the drawings result in works that stand on their own. Being primarily a painter, I find it challenging to convey line in a three-dimensional way. I always wanted to paint sculpturally.

TK You've come up with a pretty unique painting technique using window screens as both a tool and a surface. The paintings are reminiscent of tapestries, appearing embroidered or woven. Is this the effect you were after when developing your method?

SW In 2006, I visited *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, an exhibition of quilts by four generations of African American women in a small rural village in Alabama. Quilts and blankets have always interested me, as both utilitarian objects and art. Afterward, I happened to wander over to the museum's permanent collection and noticed an interesting relationship between the two shows. There were geometric abstractions by Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker, and Frank Stella that were quite similar to the Gee's Bend women's quilts. You had the white male

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(i) *Breadwinners*, 2016, acrylic on aluminum mesh, 68 × 96 inches. (ii) Detail of *Pound*, 2017, acrylic on aluminum mesh, 70 × 48 inches.

60 *Bread Winners*, 2017, acrylic on aluminum mesh, 68 × 144 inches.

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academic painters on one side and the female African American quilt-makers of rural Alabama on the other. Both investigations were equally rigorous, yet the origin of their practice, use of materials, and motives around abstraction were completely different.

From that time on I started exploring materials, trying to find my own way to bring the textural essence of textiles into painting. I experimented with different tools—spray paint, scrub brushes, floor mats, mops, windshield wipers, squeegees, plastic wrap, and cotton wipes. Encouraged by Carroll Dunham's way of rubbing paint onto the surface, I dumped paint onto a canvas on the floor and used a windshield wiper to rub it in and scrape it away. I studied closely how paint changed depending on the application and tools.

But I felt dissatisfied with these experiments. The lines in my drawings didn't translate strongly enough into paint on canvas. I started to rethink the surface itself. Instead of painting on stretched canvas, I wanted to use paint by itself, as an intersection between sculpture and drawing. When I discovered a way to combine materials to create a paint consistency that resembled malleable clay, I tried to push it through a window screen. The paint squeezing through the small openings of the mesh created soft, fiber-like expressions, but the result also evoked a pixelated image. This was the effect I had been searching for—a loose physicality that also breaks the image down into individual dots.

TK Now your interest in pointillism makes sense to me. You combine the repetitive mode of painting of artists like Seurat with the push and pull of abstract expressionists like de Kooning.

SW Yes, I definitely feel that these two painting styles drive my work. I relate to the physical push-pull of painting. But I also like the idea of not knowing the outcome of a work. After I've pressed the paint with my hands from the backside of the wire mesh, I have to move around to the front to see what results.

TK There's a blindness involved.

SW Yes. The imagery for each painting first exists in preliminary drawings. Because the drawings have so much detail and the process is so intimate, I've internalized them by the time I begin to work on the painting. Standing behind the screen, I'm already familiar with the integral qualities of the image.

TK I'm curious about what influences beyond art are crucial to your work.

SW I'm not sure. There are many, some of which I might not be directly aware of. I have a strong interest in alternative healing, Chinese medicine, and the holistic relationship between body and spirit. I attend different ceremonies from time to time.

TK What kind of ceremonies?

SW Well, I've taken some workshops, and learned how to find my spirit animal.

TK Which is?

SW I have three: a king cobra, a tiger, and an eagle.

TK Those are really aggressive animals; they're all predators. Is that a monkey necklace you are wearing?

SW This was my grandfather's; he wore it every day. It has a ruby butt and ruby eyes. This particular monkey is the god of acceptance.

TK Is that about accepting yourself, or accepting others?

SW I think it's just about the acceptance of life as it is. Letting life unfold naturally without expectation or effort.

TK You are also making sculptures. What role does sculpture play in your overall practice?

SW Often, the sculptures are counterparts to my paintings. For my show *Noble Metal*, I created a piece titled *Melting Pot* (2016). I made a small pot with a handle out of beeswax and cast it in bronze. It was displayed on a black wooden pedestal, the sides of which showed silhouettes of women carrying the pot. It complimented the paintings in the show, which revolved around the theme of fire.

My sculptures often reimagine domestic objects. I've been making a series of ceramic sculptures in a studio in Sicily with an artist who comes from nine generations of ceramists. It's been an amazing experience working with someone whose knowledge of the material is so immense, in a studio filled with the vessels, clay, and dust of several lifetimes. I'm working on a series of *tulipieres*, traditional ornate vases with multiple spouts for growing tulips. They were popular in seventeenth-century Europe. It's the first time I've made large works outside of my own studio, and it's been fascinating to create an artifact with such rich references to class and tradition in a space with such a deep history.

TK Wow. I'm really curious about that work. Where might I see the finished pieces?

SW In May, I'll have a solo exhibition at Andrew Edlin in New York. I'm excited to show at this gallery, where the works of prodigious artists like Beverly Buchanan and Thornton Dial, as well as the Gee's Bend quilters, have been exhibited. When I saw the Gee's Bend quilts at the gallery, I could see that their original purpose was not to hang on a gallery wall. The stains, cigarette burns, and other imperfections denoting their use revealed their life as objects once held and slept on, which made it quite an intimate viewing experience.

My tulipieres, however, won't be used as actual vases. I hope the place where I made them will resonate in the objects. Tulipieres used to be luxury items and symbols of wealth or aristocracy. In my version, I used clay from the ground in Sicily and they have an earthy, rough finish and handmade sensibility. On the glaze, I painted elaborate scenes of female hunters. For reference, I used hunting scenes from historical paintings and tapestries, most of which showed men doing the hunting and fishing.

TK One reason we're having this conversation now is your upcoming exhibition at SmackMellon in March. You've been working on this project for months. The space must have been a delightful challenge for you.

SW I was immediately drawn to the space because of its high cathedral ceilings and beautiful columns. It feels a bit like an ancient ruin. The exhibition is titled *Inside the Garden*, and it will be an interior garden space. In Ancient Egypt, gardens were built inside walled compounds and used as places of refuge from the harsh desert climate. When I was invited to do the exhibition at SmackMellon, Trump had just been inaugurated as president. Thinking about the trying political times ahead, I decided to create a space that could serve as a place of refuge from the turbulence of the outside world.

TK And what will be the components of the garden? Will there be water?

SW The exhibit will include a "stained-glass" installation, a "tapestry" painting, and benches to sit on. I'd planned to create a long rectangular pool of water in the middle of the space to reflect the sunlight and the starry sky from the painting opposite the windows. But it was too complicated to realize. Still, it was important to have a reflective surface in the center of the space, so I built a set of benches that will be finished with a high-gloss automotive paint. They will reflect their surroundings almost as well as water would.

The sides of the benches show silhouettes of female gardeners. When developing the forms for the cutouts, I studied illuminated manuscripts showing people watering lawns, trimming bushes, and picking fruit from trees.

TK Is it real stained glass this time?

SW No. These are paintings, similar to my piece *Rainbow Arcade*. But here they have a palette of mostly cool green and blue and are painted with resin on Mylar. Each panel repeats the same basic composition, with a variation of thick and thin black enamel lines outlining the edges of the leaves and flowers.

Facing the "stained-glass" wall will be one of my large horizontal "tapestry" paintings—a vast skyscape with yellow and gold dots above a blue, gold, and green landscape with plants and flowers. I like the notion of pushing a landscape through a window.

When I conceived the show, I was thinking about the idea of day and night speaking to one another. The window paintings will look different from hour to hour, depending on the time and weather. The installation will have a shifting mood and changing energy.

TK It sounds quite cinematic.

SW When considering the components of the installation, I thought about the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence designed by Matisse. It was an enormous undertaking toward the end of his life and it took him four years to create it. I've always been intrigued by the idea of an art chapel, a kind of nonreligious sanctuary. The Rothko Chapel and James Turrell's *The Color Inside* also engage in this holistic way with architecture, sculpture, light, and the outdoors. Matisse's chapel included an altar table made from a light-brown porous stone resembling the texture of bread. Matisse mastered the space in such complex ways. And how people use the chapel is always changing.

TK *Inside the Garden* must have involved some serious architectural planning. Did you do this all by yourself?

SW The plans were made in several rounds of preliminary drawings and 3D renderings. It's both exciting and daunting to create an installation of this scale because it's unclear how it will manifest. That unforeseen element is similar to my painting process. It's a bit like building a set for a movie; the people entering the space will interact with the scenery.