

Fashion and Paint

Sarah Mikenis “*cover-up*,” a solo exhibition at Nationale

By Lindsay Martin



Too Close

Bright stripes and floral prints drape and fold like dresses in a trendy LA boutique throughout Sarah Mikenis’s solo exhibition, “*cover-up*” at Nationale this month. The essence of vintage swimsuits, striped beach towels or bargained floral frocks appear in these works in an illusionary manner where seemingly, one recognizes fabric, but then with a second glance distinguishes a painted image. Like a sundress on a sweaty body, the paintings’ canvases sag and cling to wooden frames and the viewer to be transported into a world of fabric, textile and fashion. Could these paintings be close-ups of corduroy, architectural columns, window canopies or bed sheets? Where does this texture exist? Who wears this pattern? But the artist does not desire to put these paintings on a body or on top of a bed in a room. Sarah Mikenis examines fabric as the central object and denies the viewer a habitat for the prints to live in, forcing us to ask what textiles mean in the world of contemporary painting. Her paintings abstract pattern so everyday fibers exist in an unfamiliar milieu.

The study of fabric begins with her unique pairing of pattern in her piece, *Too Close*. Candy cane stripes and salmon-pink swatches divide the canvas in half as fabric and architecture meet to form a place via a collision of texture. Mikenis mixes sand with the paint and I imagine a moment of a beach towel on top of concrete. However, the title *Too Close* sets a parameter for space and the investigation becomes microscopic. I imagine the artist zeroing in on the surface of material in *Too Close*, focusing on the relationship of the two presences together to bring the dynamic into new light.



False Front

False Front integrates two different prints in one composition, as if striped sheets are cut to open up geologic and porous hypodermis. Sarah Mikenis allows the airbrush to blur rosey floral color with bright candy stripes, which emphasizes the artist's hand through different application and investigates the conflicting color and pattern relationships. Mikenis uses multiple paint application techniques throughout the show but is very clearly using the traditional materials of oil on canvas, combining traditional painting with contemporary inspiration. She could have scrunched up pre-printed fabric and adorned the rectangle with an outfit. Instead, she uses fabric as a still life and an abstracted close-up of quotidian textures. The viewer is given a relationship with an image but also with the surface, as the image evolves from the folds and curves of the constructed canvas.

Although the viewer is denied the body that these fabrics may cover, the body is still present because of the canvas's organic relationship to skin. These paintings become an allegory of the body through titles and false three-dimensional surface. Mikenis compares the body of a canvas to the body of oneself, as fabric clings like tight jeans, rolls of canvas naturally appear like rolls of a torso. Fabric hides any tell tale of skin. The titles, like *Too Close*, *False Front* and *Faking It*, imply relationships between bodies and fabrics, further the abstracted and geometric surfaces of the painting to the realm of fashion and clothing. Clothing is a false front: a decoration for the body while also being functional. Fashion, like camouflage, allows the adorned to 'fake it' with flashy bold color and unnatural pattern. *Too Close*, a message that can be interpreted in many ways, is also an opportunity to think of how clothing sucks and sags and creates an altered version of the body's form. Or, bodies that lie too close together with only fabric in between flesh.



Best in Bloom

Fashion patterns offer new ways to investigate Josef Albers' color theory, which argues that color relationships provide illusion and depth to two dimensional work without any need for perspective. If red and green and black belong together in a Scottish kilt, why not on a painting? Mondrian could have been inventing a fashion print as much as a painting composition, thanks to the Bauhaus color theory. Fashion prints inspire the world with organizational strategies. A painting composition can also be another way of organization. When a pattern's vernacular is wide enough that popular culture is aware of its presence, like black and white houndstooth, red plaid, white polka dots, etc., the language of culture becomes a different tool for communicating color. When I see *Best in Bloom*, I think of the consumer that wears that particular print, the print's function, and where one would find the floral design in the wide world. I wonder if Mikenis is limited to the prints in the Los Angeles garment district, or if these are reminiscent of personal relationships in the artists' life.

For *Best in Bloom*, the floral print traces back to the decorum of femininity with dress prints and tapestries. Not only does Sarah Mikenis floral print in her paintings remind me of 1980's interior curtains, they also remind me of the floral print Forever 21 had in their collection last year, as the pattern translates through generation and function, from upholstery to dress to painting. The rose pattern is seen in textile prints since the Tudor family ruled England, but the color also contains hints of Baroque and Rococo weaving. Mikenis experiments with fashion and pattern to negotiate a long history of textile decisions, color, and culture. "Cover-up" is a refreshing painting puzzle that evokes questions about the body and textile's relationships with painting and color theory. Sarah Mikenis should continue to use the culture of fabric to thwart the history of the painted image to place it in the present.



Faking It