



Cara Tomlinson

Sums: New Work

January 20 to March 13, 2011

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery
of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
Portland, Oregon



Animal Theory
2010
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches

“Seeing itself is a history built up of choices and environment. Painting is one way to reveal and make conscious our process of seeing. The work that results is a history of these momentary systems of decipherment.”

Cara Tomlinson

Cara Tomlinson is an assistant professor of art and program head of painting in the Department of Art at Lewis & Clark College, a post she has held since 2006. She has a B.A. from Bennington College and an M.F.A. from the University of Oregon. Her website is www.caratomlinson.com.

I have a small collection of children’s schoolbooks dating from the early 1900s through the 1970s. My interest is partly nostalgic; the image of Dick and Jane blithely romping around their backyard circa 1963 is fraught with memories of third grade and the barely comprehensible assassination of JFK. I remember the teary-eyed nun announcing the tragedy at school and how strange it was to see a television wheeled into the classroom on a cart. Later that afternoon, limply draped over the wrought iron railing of our back steps, I sensed that somehow the world was different from how it appeared. I knew I should feel sad, but instead I felt disembodied and disconnected from my friends playing freeze tag in the yard below.

This anti-epiphany was simply one example (albeit a dramatic one) of the many darker revelations, large and small, that transform our childlike selves into our adult personas. To look at the illustrations from school-issued books such as *I Live with Others* (1957) or *This Is Our Family* (1951) is to be reminded of the symbolic abyss between the schematic utopias of these idealized representations and the more uncertain realities of actual childhood.

I mention all of this because I have a drawing by Cara Tomlinson hanging on my wall that often elicits this kind of reverie. The graphite outlines of three children wearing conical party hats parade across the paper; the girl in front appears to lead two blindfolded boys in single file. The figures look as if they have been traced from a children’s book from the 1950s, a supposed golden age for middle class notions of security and stability. In Tomlinson’s drawing all is not well, and although this kind of iconography of innocence lends itself to cheap irony, the foreboding in her image is not gratuitous; instead, I sense a great empathy. The children have entered a kind of yellowish haze, and the boy in the middle seems particularly threatened by a severe black oval

floating over his head. Who is this girl, leading sightless companions through a vague terrain? Is she a stand-in for the artist, doing what she can to move bravely forward despite her own disorientation?

This interpretation informs how I approach much of Tomlinson's subsequent work in painting, drawing, sculpture, video, and installation. A sense of gentle uneasiness seems to emanate from her work, whatever medium she employs. This is an unusual combination, gentleness and unease; it stems, I think, from Tomlinson's understanding of the unanticipated difficulties that confront our altruistic selves at each and every step. Her work is never hyperbolic, aggressive, or obvious. There is wonder in her imagery: the wonder of looking closely, of touching sensitively, of garnering the kind of nonverbal knowledge that can only come from paying close attention to the small things in the world. We should never make the mistake of assuming the diminutive in scale to be unimportant. It is in the small things that we can most clearly see the traces of larger forces beyond our control, whether that power is molecular, spiritual, or political.

Tomlinson points to this unease when she employs the term *apophenia*—the involuntary perception of connections and patterns in seemingly random events, creating a sense of exaggerated significance. Under certain circumstances this could be a definition of psychosis, but a more generous reading might suggest an extra sensitivity to the delicate web of cause and effect that interpenetrates all of existence. This sensitivity is a double-edged sword, for while it can reveal almost mystical connections, it also interrupts and interferes with daily life by always insisting on the acknowledgment of patterns and relationships.

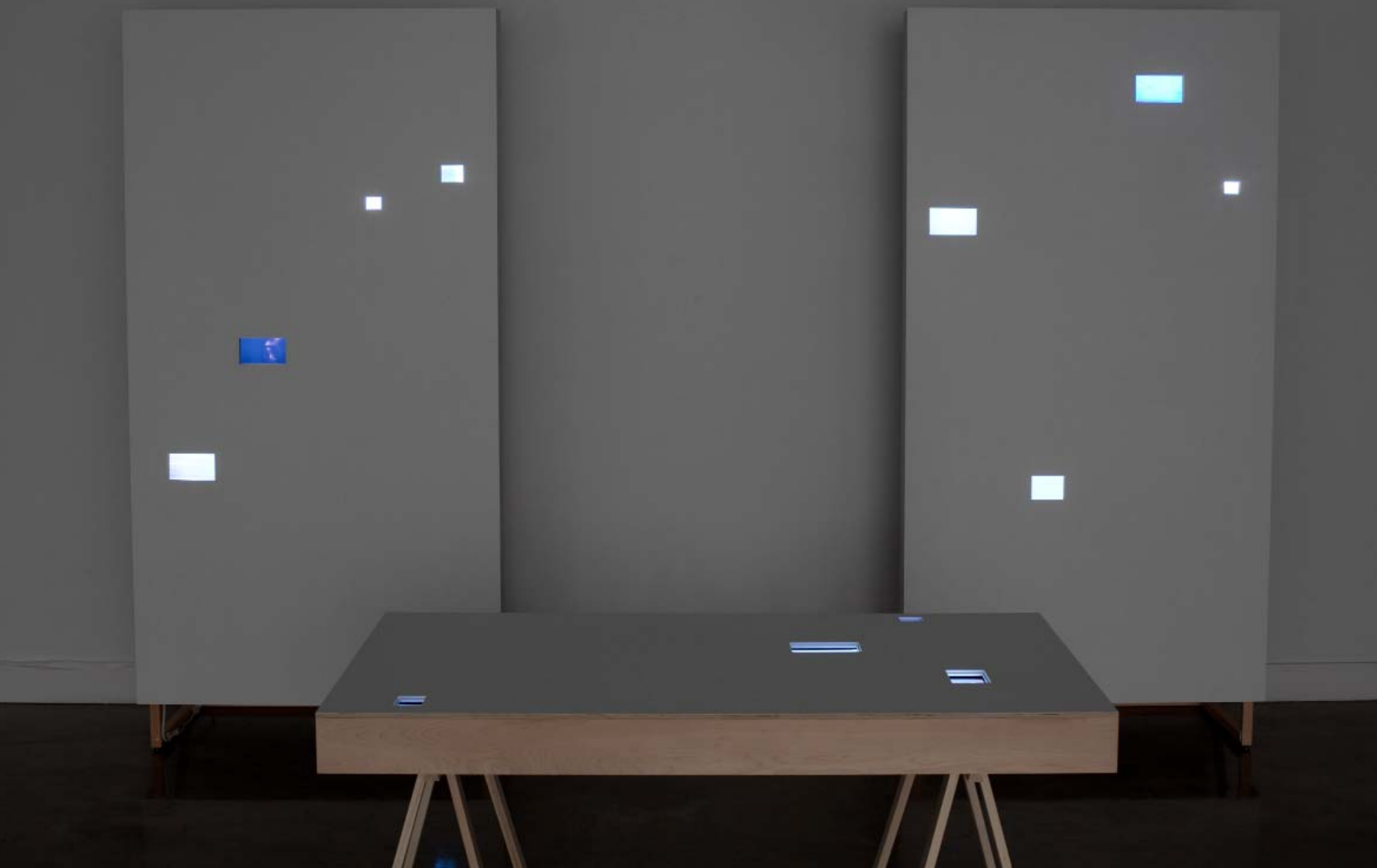
Tomlinson's installation *Apophenia* utilizes video, sound, and drawing to explore the quiet madness of close observation. The video screens are inset in the wall seemingly at random, and the images throb and flicker, pro-

ducing punctuations of light and movement. A nocturnal orgy of insects flits around a beam of light, waterbugs skate upon the surface of a pond, sunlight and shadow play across a sheet of paper, and water rushes through the video frame, creating endless facets of reflection. The soundtrack is the muffled voice of a child, lost in her own private reverie. This nonlinear simultaneity of image and sound is both specific and abstract—we know what we are looking at, and the lilting cadence of the child's voice is vaguely comforting. Yet the cumulative effect suggests that we cannot apprehend or appreciate the full import because the richness of the present moment blinds us with complexity.

Tomlinson's paintings explore and embody kindred feelings in that they seem to come into being through a series of stops and starts. It is as if each painting traced a path taken each morning; where and how the brush traverses the surface of the canvas depends on both psychological and material encounters. The result is a hybrid topography resulting from the constant negotiation of internal forces and external realities. Architecture and landscape, furniture and bodies, figuration and abstraction, the vivid and the mute: all are at play in the field of her shifting iconography. In Tomlinson's small-scale universes, everything moves in relation to everything else; there is neither center nor resting spot. Her work hints at a cosmic restlessness, where any perceived stillness is an illusion. We are saved—temporarily perhaps—from eternal vertigo by the simple act of framing intensely observed experience.

Mark Alice Durant

Artist and writer Mark Alice Durant is on the faculties of the University of Maryland and the Milton Avery Graduate School for the Arts at Bard College. He is editor of the website *Saint-Lucy.com*.



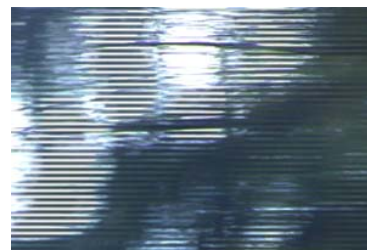
Apophenia

2010-2011

Installation of 17 videos on four surfaces

with sound

8 x 20 x 15 feet



Apophenia (details) still frames of individual videos from installation, 2010-11



As long as I have known her, Cara Tomlinson has been a painter's painter. She has an innate understanding of the way paint works in all its richness, its physicality, and its ability to be a vehicle for visualizing and realizing a world within the four edges of a canvas. Painting allows her to establish a creative space where thoughts can remain purely visual and preverbal. It is in this intuitive, liminal space that Tomlinson thrives. When seeing the work in *Sums: New Work*, the viewer is also keenly aware that the artist has intentionally allowed her paintings to show how one step leads to the next. One sees the passing of time in carefully considered, subtle layers. Each studio session gives rise to new marks or passages. We are mindful that each day in the studio is different, in the same way one can never stand in the same river twice. Formed in large part by the previous day's work, the pieces chronicle the ever-changing condition of her environment, as well as her artistic temperament. For many years Tomlinson has used her studio practice to map her mental and physical landscape while exploring her own imaginative space. The works show formal and structural realizations, providing a site for investigation that is a part of Tomlinson's quiet quest to find and build an understanding of the way the world works.

The nearly inexhaustible, fertile language of painting is the primary one through which Cara Tomlinson examines her ideas. (It also shapes the other ways in which she works with sculpture, installation, or video.) Tomlinson's images are born from the myriad influences and disparate sources she draws from to build her visual vocabulary. Elements taken from geology, childhood memories, art history, cartography, and improvised architecture come

Selfstarter
2009
Oil on linen
38 x 36 inches

together, providing a glimpse into the artist's psychological and spiritual state of mind. As we, the viewers, examine the strata in *Selfstarter* (2009), we find that

in the early stages of the painting, a wobbly mesh of high-chroma oranges, yellows, and reds are woven atop a lighter ochre background. Eventually a passage of cool-hued, irregular geometric shapes are quilted together to form a dome that appears to be supported by a series of unstable gray, pipe-like armatures. These centralized elements are isolated as large passages of the intricate mesh fade, but they are not lost beneath the creamy, semitransparent layers of battleship gray. In this particular piece, we see Tomlinson's tendency to approach painting with a series of contradictory moves. On one day there appears to be a need to pare down, followed by a response in the form of elaborate solutions, or to either intensify or subdue a color's chroma, or to build and then erase. These dramatic pendulum swings of contradiction describe the doubt that is at the very heart of her practice. As the paintings document the artist's decisions, we can almost hear Tomlinson's dialogue with them, asking: "Is this right? What about this?" In doing so, Tomlinson is gently nudging the painting toward home. This strategy leads to the paintings' instinctual, unrehearsed quality that is discovered rather than planned out. (After all, what is the point of mapping one's subconscious space if one already has all the answers?) Any given layer of the painting is a response to the layer beneath, as if the Cara Tomlinson from last week were leaving signposts or obstacles for the Cara Tomlinson of today to wrestle with. She describes her paintings as "time capsules" that serve as repositories layered to describe all the decisions made over the course of the months or years that go into each of them.¹

The accumulated strata are realized in a similar way in the sculptural objects in the exhibition. In some, we see heaps of paint laid down not in an illusionistic sense, but in a tactile way, creating literal piles of paint. The paint is stacked on with a gooey, sexy physicality that is at once seductive and repulsive. An irregular nugget of fleshy

pigment comes into the world slowly, one stroke of paint at a time. By affixing wafer-thin discs of brightly colored paint with laboratory pins, Tomlinson again provides an additional layer to the viewing experience. The unexpected additions add delicate touches of delight and whimsy to the objects. The almost absurd elements show the artist again responding in a contradictory way to the previous state, the ever-important “what’s next?” part of her process. Her freestanding tower-like structures are, like buildings, constructed from the ground up and lend themselves perfectly to the artist’s desire to examine life’s strata. The viewer can see the logical steps for these three-dimensional representations. The pieces are often built using a hodgepodge assortment of wood segments that appear to have come from different sources, occasionally becoming more and more irregular as they near the top. This work, which is at once anthropomorphic and architectural, presents a view both large *and* potentially small, the Hermetic notion of the microcosm and the macrocosm: understanding the macrocosm (the universe) is linked to the understanding of the microcosm (oneself).

While at first the drawings in Tomlinson’s *Meditation Series: Code Work* (2009-2010) might be seen as non sequiturs, one must consider how the nearly decade-long project arose. It was begun during a particularly transitional time, one marked with unstable and unpredictable conditions in Tomlinson’s professional and personal life. During this time of upheaval, she was without a studio, and she sought a way not only to continue working, but to limit her focus to a finite, intimate surface, and to slow down while dramatically reducing the parameters for her practice. Within the narrow scope of the *Meditation Series: Code Work* drawings, the artist gave herself only one kind of mark (a round dot), allowed herself only a handful

of colors (usually closely related), and employed the simplest of armatures (the grid) as a support structure for this endeavor. The practice became a way to escape the nearly infinite possibilities of the paintings and sculptures. Doubt was dissipated, and she was allowed to “home in on the noise of [her] mind.”² There can be no missteps, only the kind of meditative solitude necessary to complete her studio self. In a way these drawings mimic the end result of the painting in that they become a document for the time the artist has spent with the objects.

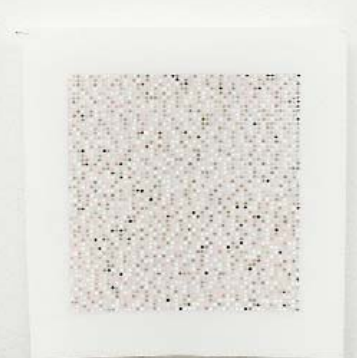
In creating this map, our cartographer presents a particular view of her world, the view as seen through her very specific lens. Tomlinson adds the additional, challenging task of presenting the viewer a map that reconciles the cumulative effects of time. The pieces are finished only when there is the realization on the part of the artist that she has found the point of rightness, and the image in some way describes the reason she started the work in the first place. In these pieces we find the artist building a common ground where the simple and the complex, the seductive and the repulsive, the organic and the man-made are inextricably linked just as they are in the real world. In her labors to visually and formally reconcile the ever-changing landscape of her mind, Tomlinson presents the viewer with the insights gained from her wonderful endeavors as she slowly moves toward the truth.

Hamlett Dobbins

Hamlett Dobbins is the director of the Clough-Hanson Gallery at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee.

¹ Cara Tomlinson’s statement regarding the 2009 paintings found at www.caratolinson.com.

² Telephone conversation with the artist, May 5, 2010.



Meditation Series: Code Work (I-IX)
2009-2010
Ink and gouache on two sheets of Duralar
12 x 12 inches each



Animal Theory Series (I-VI)
 2010
 Oil on canvas board
 16 x 20 inches



Animal Theory Series (II-VI)
 2010
 Oil on canvas board
 16 x 20 inches



Supplement
2010
Plaster, wood, oil paint, step stool
29 x 20 x 20 inches

Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of the artist.
Photographs by Aaron Johanson.

Apophenia
2010-2011
Installation of 17 videos on
four wood surfaces with sound
8 x 20 x 15 feet

Affordances
2010-11
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches

Supplements
2010-11
Mixed media, including plaster,
wood, and oil paint
Variable dimensions

Untitled
2010-11
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches

Animal Theory
2010
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches

Animal Theory Series I-VI
2010
Oil on canvas board
16 x 20 inches each

Know Knot
2010
Oil on linen
38 x 36 inches

Span
2010
Oil on linen
38 x 36 inches

User Illusion
2010
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches

Meditation Series: Code Work I-IX
2009-2010
Ink and gouache on two sheets
of Duralar
12 x 12 inches each

Selfstarter
2009
Oil on linen
38 x 36 inches

On the Cover:
User Illusion (detail)
2010
Oil on linen
60 x 72 inches



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