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Bondage Unbound: Rupture and Suture in the Art of Beth Stuart

Beth Stuart, *What Bonds Are These?* La Centrale, Montreal.
March 30 - May 6, 2012

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BONDAGE UNBOUND: IN THE ART

Beth Stuart, *What Bonds Are These?*

La Centrale, Montreal. March 30 - May 6, 2012

Beth Stuart performed a deft and bold triage on both painting and sculpture here, generating tasty and interrogatory hybrids that loosened the moorings and broke asunder some of the more salient constraints of late Modernism itself. The trap was sprung (or should we say 'sprang?') in meaning, making and materials and effected a potent disruption of Modernist tropes at once cunning and sophisticated.

Stuart worked from an ancient Danish weaving technique called Sprang and another known as ply-split braiding. Both techniques produce braided textiles that infringe upon and transcend the orthodoxies of common woven structures. Stuart dovetails what are traditionally understood as opposites into seamlessly factured and ontological wholes. Read as sculpture, and then again as painting, they beguiled us and blew away our assumptions and assumptive contexts alike about what is still possible for painting.

Now, Sprang has a pristine history that goes back at least as far as the Bronze Age, but who knew it would resurface and foreground itself in cutting-edge contemporary practice? This is not lace or knitting but something far stranger and more subversive still, and although it has been largely supplanted by knitting, it remains almost primordial in its mien. Yet Stuart's work is no craven folk art. Nor is it some sad nostalgia. She employs Sprang to reinvent the practice of painting at a juncture when it has been largely subsumed by both stifling taxonomy and Modernist orthodoxy. And Stuart has absolutely nothing to do with painting's past. Instead, she prophesies its future, and enables, if you will, a glorious Sprang Spring of Painting.

I wrote recently about Harold Klunder's paintings as working from a kind of cat's cradle, the Inuit string game, and Stuart's innovative use of Sprang also evoked that children's game in both literal and metaphoric fashion. Indeed, Stuart's tireless fingers give a new meaning to the phrase 'deft touch.' So nimble is she in the making that, if her works are unavoidably corporeal in their demeanor, she reminds us of a gifted surgeon, stitching wounds together with such dexterity that the cicatrices never show. Or say rather they are more about the schema of the body image than the body itself and its wounds proper. Her works possess mensurable and magnetic aura. These are paintings that have body and heft and yet they also possess something liminal and are ineffable and compelling as such. The psychoanalyst Paul Schilder used the term 'body image,' an idea eminently useful where Stuart's subversive metamorphs are concerned. He worked from what Head and Holmes (1911-12) had previously identified as the 'postural model of the body.' The postural model was a neurological construct that elucidated human ability to move effortlessly through space without conscious awareness. Head and Holmes had argued that anything that enables the conscious movement of our bodies is added to the intrinsic model of the self and is entrenched in the schema. The body schema expands according to the clothes one wears. Head wrote, "a woman's power of localization may extend to the feather in her hat."¹ (In Head's time, women wore hats with wide brims and extravagant feathers.) The feathers were brought inside the woman's body schema. Well, in Stuart's work, every stitch reminds us of the multiple feathers in her hat and, of course, the postural model of the body in its most generative

sense, and her work evokes with startling clarity the body's image in space.

Schilder published his seminal "The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the constructive energies of the psyche" in 1935. He argues that the image of the human body means the very picture of one's own body that is formed in the mind, that is to say, the way it appears to ourselves in immediate experience as a unity of the body. For Schilder, the body schema is the tri-dimensional image everybody has of him/herself. We may call it "body image." "The term indicates that we are not dealing with a mere sensation or imagination. There is a self-appearance of the body. It indicates also that, although it has come through the senses, it is not a mere perception. There are mental pictures and representations involved in it, but it is not mere representation."²

As unlikely and altogether remarkable as it may be, Stuart's saucy hybrids relate not only to Schilder's dynamic body-image but more specifically to the tri-dimensional concept of the body image as lived, as having a libidinous structure, as well as physiological and sociological aspects. It is perhaps no surprise that Stuart should mention the importance to her of medieval French mystic Marguerite Porete, who proposed that the union of body and soul can be enabled in the act of making love to God.

As though culling and collating Schilder's research and findings, 1960s feminist art criticism, surrealism and textile arts, we find that Stuart imbues each work with a quirky persona and an entirely winning mien. Are they more people than paintings, then? The works at La Centrale certainly relate to one another in an altogether somatic way and each has a strong, distinctive persona, so they

RUPTURE AND SUTURE OF BETH STUART



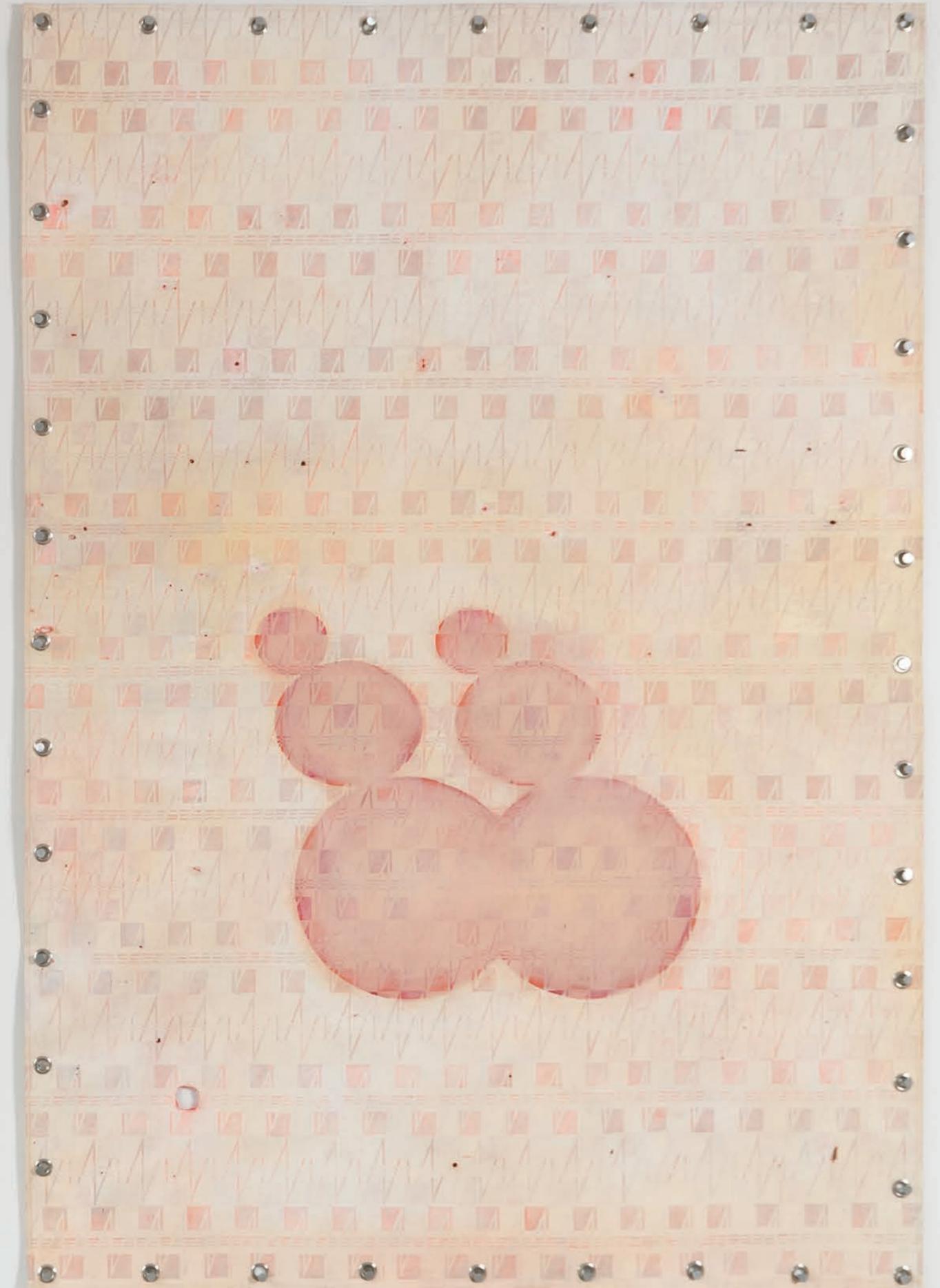
Beth Stuart, *Stanchions for E.H./Thingdu*, 2012.
Spranged handcut leather, maple, walnut,
unique porcelain vessel, unique glazed
porcelain hooks. image courtesy the artist,
photography: Paul Litherland.



Beth Stuart, *But a weak smile*, 2012.
Commercial artist's linen (weft partially
removed, warp spranged, remainder pleated),
gesso, gold leaf, unique glazed porcelain
stanchion hardware, image courtesy the artist,
photography: Paul Litherland.

Beth Stuart, Installation view, *What Bonds Are These?*, La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, image courtesy the artist, photography: Paul Litherland.





Beth Stuart, *Work, (Jack Bush)*, 2012. Commercial artist's linen, (weft partially removed and then spranged), gesso, acrylic paint, grommets, hanging hardware.
And: *Work, (Varvara Stepanova)*, 2012. Acrylic and water media on canvas, grommets, hanging hardware, image courtesy the artist, photography: Paul Litherland.



Beth Stuart, *Stanchions for E.H./Immanent collapse*, 2012, spranged linen, porcelain, iron hooks, gesso, acrylic paint, image courtesy the artist, photography: Paul Litherland.

dictate where they are placed and how they relate to each other – and how we relate to them. Stuart is a seeker of liminal states, which have multi-tiered suggestions for the reading of her work.

These works possess something of the sensuous tactility of Jasper Johns' grisaille drawings, and the radiant calm of an Agnes Martin painting, if the latter had used thread rather than pigment in the facture. Stuart goes under the hood of painting, as it were, recalibrating both engine and chassis. This is no exaggeration, Stuart interrogates painting as object first and foremost, unhooking it from late Modernist tropes, truisms and niceties and effectively vacating them altogether. She pulls the tablecloth out from under the glasses, plates and cutlery of painting, as it were, and lets the tablecloth stand alone as a language worthy of redemption. In other words, she goes way beyond the work of many a stalwart

late-Modernist painter, using the body image and showing that the somatic integrity of abstract painting is still seminal to our experience and devoutly to be sought. Stuart speaks to painting in terms of rupture and, in terms of sculpture, suture.

Yet you can't get the sheer radicality and seamless facture of these works through looking at reproductions or meditating upon the ends of theory. They must be experienced in person, up close in terms of body-image, and over time. They slowly release a haunting self-presence less gnomic than universal and, in any case, genuinely inviting.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossing* and *Canadian Art*.

Notes

¹ Sandra Blakeslee, Matthew Blakeslee, "The Body Has a Mind of Its Own: How Body Maps in Your Brain Help You Do (Almost) Everything Better" (Google eBook) New York: Random House Digital, Inc., 2008-09, p. 33.

² Paul Schilder, "The Image and Appearance of the Human Body." London: Psyche Monographs: No. 4. Published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., London, 1935, p. 11.