Press Release

Cay Bahnmiller

February 17 – April 15, 2023
Opening: Friday, February 17, 6–8pm

Gallery hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–6pm

Cay Bahnmiller (b. 1955; d. 2007, Detroit, USA) was born in Wayne, Michigan. After spending part of her childhood in Argentina and Germany, Bahnmiller lived and worked in Detroit until her death.

Bahnmiller's art is marked by accumulation: of paint, found objects, texts, memories and even of time. Layered and sedimented, Bahnmiller collapsed temporality, allowing her work to reflect the profusion of experience – in all its facets – that can only be accumulated through life lived. She worked fluidly across mediums. Making no distinction between surfaces, she built compositions on street signs, books, pages torn from magazines and auction catalogs, found pieces of wood and toys. This openness was offset by her rigorous examination of her approach and subject matter. There is a clarity and intensity of vision that reveals how purposefully and carefully Bahnmiller crafted her dense work. She related occurrence through both abstract language and exacting detail.

Making the evolving and eroding landscape of Detroit a crucial focus of her work, she connected her own existence with the conditions of the city. Beyond this, her work would ultimately touch a vast range of themes, from poetry, literature and art history, to class and social stratification, politics, trauma, and death. After being violently assaulted in 1993, Bahnmiller's work became more insular, and her lifelong preoccupation with urban space was accented by a more conflicted relationship between public and private. Her own memory was a key element in her working method. Often calling back to her time abroad, she allowed her childhood experiences to commingle with the literature she favored and her everyday life in the city. "My perception in painting is enhanced by executing this work in the archeological ruin of Detroit," she wrote, "a city steeped in sedimentation of light... The stark absence of an 'outer' world necessitates the imaging of an interior." Bahnmiller collected cast-off bits of her city – allowing them to convey the character of the place and play roles in her own narratives – building up sculptures that are almost camouflaged.

A contradictory thread runs through both Bahnmiller's life and her art. Her struggle to reconcile the conflicting sides of her personality was something she grappled with until her death. She desired greater recognition as an artist and yet sabotaged her own career repeatedly. Bahnmiller shut down a solo show for herself on the opening day. Works were often made, unmade and made again, showing traces of each stage and the desire to revise and rework. Many of her works arrived at a near-monochrome all over, covering all that was once there of text, figuration and reference. Visceral, unstable and painful, their immediacy is tangible. "In my search for form, the final construction and process often results from negation," she wrote. True to her belief that "painting is inscription, rather than description," she used the world of art and its vicissitude – taste, decor, culture, speculation, history – as the literal base of her work, building up layered, totemic, works on magazine pages, auction catalogues, restaurant stationary, and books by her favorite authors. These works also testify to her being a reader and writer as much as an artist.

Cay Bahnmiller is represented in the collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Her work has been written about in Artforum and The New York Times, among other periodicals. A multi-part chronicle of Bahnmiller's life and work was written by the artist Cary Loren for Three Fold Press in 2021. Since her death, solo shows have been organized at What Pipeline, Detroit and White Columns, New York. This is the first solo exhibition of her work to be held in Europe.

This exhibition was realized in collaboration with the Estate of Cay Bahnmiller and What Pipeline, Detroit.