

# ARTFORUM

Sarah Rapson ESSEX STREET  
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Sarah Rapson, *Classical Landscape*, 2011, mixed media, 8 x 11 ¾ "

*Tell me what you want, what you really really want  
I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want.*

Sarah Rapson deadpanned a variation of this call-and-response for sixteen minutes in an early audio work, stretching the refrain from this famous Spice Girls anthem on female solidarity into an exasperated mantra. At the entrance to Rapson's survey at Essex Street, the piece could be heard through a set of headphones while on the wall opposite hung *Untitled*, a photogravure featuring the title page from a later edition of H. W. Janson's *History of Art* (1962), that virtually womanless undergraduate-syllabus staple from the latter half of the twentieth century. Upon this sheet of paper, Rapson superimposed a picture of a Bridget Riley painting, the undulating Op-art stripes of which obscure the name of Dora Jane Janson, H. W.'s wife and, occasionally, coauthor. Together, these pieces, both from 1997, announced a long-standing mission of this enigmatic British artist: to deflate the patriarchal bastions of contemporary art on her own ludic (and lachrymose) terms.

An air of resignation suffused most of the exhibition, grimly titled "Sell The House." For *An Enduring Vision*, 2018, Rapson slathered white paint over the *New York Times'* Arts section. And for *Untitled (Art in Review)*, 2019, it looks as though she caked the canvas in tar. These more recent works felt like punkier relatives of the '80s "joke paintings" by Richard Prince, who employed Rapson as an assistant in the '90s, when she still lived in New York. (She returned to England in 2004, and now, rather appropriately lives, loner-like, near the sea.) Wittier was *Flag (New York Times Sutra #3)*, 2008, a crumbling, yellowed grid of write-ups from the Times about blue-chip male artists. In it, Rapson discreetly penciled a phone number, apparently that of a day trader. Nearby, defeat seemed to permeate *Classical Landscape*, 2011, a tiny white monochrome on which a reproduction of a sublime Claude Lorraine painting has been clumsily taped. A possible interpretation: An artist can find many ways to give up, some more imaginative than others. *One Thing I like about Zen*, 2008, takes its title from a quote by Rapson's lodestar, Agnes Martin, whose *Times* obituary is glued onto the support. The titular *thing*? "[Zen] doesn't believe in achievement."

Neither does Rapson, of course. Achievement is a terminus; failure is more freeing, fascinating, terrifying. In a 2001 capsule review, a *Times* critic misread her aesthetic as mourning "the *tragedy* of unfulfilled careerism" (*italics mine*). Here and there, her approach curdles into glibness (see *Highly Important 19th Century Sculpture*, 2019, a lacteal slab of a painting). But, as a whole, "Sell The House" remained bracing because of Rapson's rap-

scallion mettle, certainly, but also because of her work's affective proximities between obsession and omission, apathy and love. See how, in *Cathcart Hill*, 2000—one of two Super 8 shorts in which a bewigged Rapson infiltrates the higher institutions of art—she steers a baby carriage, in a panic, through Tate Modern's male-centric Minimalist wing before using a Carl Andre floor piece as a catwalk. Earlier in the film, in a succession of shaky overhead shots, Rapson enters and lopes through Turbine Hall, first alone, then clinging to the child, then by herself once more. She glances over her shoulder, as though she's being hunted. But the dream logic of the sequence obscures whether she's fleeing to or from the museum, whether it's a zone of refuge or of dread.

"Everything is itself and its opposite, knowing and believing at once," mused the press release, perhaps nodding to the spiritual lens through which Rapson's practice is sometimes read, or blurred. Art falls into two categories, she once told an interviewer: religion and entertainment. She placed herself in the first camp. Was she being ironic? The other short film on view, *Sufficient Fortune*, 2002, features Nick Drake's "Know," a sparse lullaby that could be heard throughout the gallery. Its only verse served as the show's second mantra, and it perfectly distills Rapson's ethic of tender negation:

*Know that I love you.  
Know I don't care.  
Know that I see you.  
Know I'm not there.*

—Zack Hatfield