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Sadie Benning

Blinded by the Light at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

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By Jody Zellen



Sadie Benning's cross disciplinary practice is idiosyncratic. Her early videos were created in the late 1980s with a toy camera —the Fisher-Price Pixelvision— given to her by her filmmaker father James Benning. With the Pixelvision, Benning created personal stories that were celebrated for their honesty and insight. Her remarkable two channel work *Play Pause*, 2007 also received rave reviews and she was applauded for the quirky nature of her drawings which were sequenced together with audio to create an engaging narrative about isolation and urban life. Benning's latest works are a departure from film and video, and they are similarly labor intensive, albeit in a different way. To make her current mixed media assemblages, she sketches a simple linear composition on a large piece of wood, then cuts out the individual sections and after encasing them in aqua resin and paint, she reassembles the various sized and shaped individual pieces, attaching them to a wooden support. The finished work feels like a successfully completed giant jigsaw puzzle. The pieces retain the quality of the original drawing through slightly rounded edges and narrow dark spaces between the cutout objects, yet the works are best described as three-dimensional paintings.

In Benning's solo exhibition *Blinded by the Light*, viewers immediately confront a large wall with eighteen sunsets. Each 38 x 54 inch piece contains a red semicircle hanging from the top edge of the frame, floating in a light blue ground,

hovering above representations of the ripples of the ocean with multicolored reflective sparkles, indicative of how the water might appear during a sunset. Benning presents these works in a long three by six grid allowing viewers to compare and contrast the different iterations. While the sun sets each day, it never looks the same. Benning is interested in the way time is experienced and the works in this exhibition, her most colorful to date, read as a departure from her political commentary and cultural critiques. They appear to be happy works, perhaps as a point of contention or reprieve in these dire times.

The forty plus works in the exhibition have a childlike simplicity and while Benning includes images of a smiley face, a rainbow, a pink alien and a green zombie, as well as abstractions of nature —a garden, a field and a tree— her point is not solely to reduce the world to a child's vantage point, but to play with the ways in which simple things sign for something more. What could a pink alien signify? What are the elements that make up Benning's *Yellow Field* or *Garden*? The tree that occupies the center of a painting entitled *Yellow Tree*, is green. An image of an awkward smiley face over a rainbow —hokey symbols drawn from popular culture— make a strange combination and like many of the works on view, elicit a smile. Benning's barebones imagery is laden with intent to undermine convention, while simultaneously inspiring a cheerful response.

Included in the exhibition are figures, objects as well as scenes of nature. Three of Benning's figures wear dark sunglasses, perhaps as the title suggests to protect them from the blinding light. What emotions and feelings hide behind these facades? Do their dark glasses keep them safe in these trying times? Benning poses questions that remain unanswered. Perhaps meaning becomes apparent through juxtaposition as Benning presents the works as diptychs and multi-panel sequences although they are listed as individual works. Whatever the implied narrative, Benning's installation is a playful, thoughtful and inspiring reflection of the inner workings of her mind that combines the personal with the universal.

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