

GAGOSIAN
ARTFORUM

Sarah Sze
Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto

Dan Adler



Sarah Sze, Images in Debris, 2018, mirrors, wood, stainless steel, ink-jet prints, projectors, lamps, desks, stools, ladders, stone, acrylic, dimensions variable.

Sarah Sze's solo show here featured a single massive installation, *Images in Debris*, 2018. At the heart of the work was an L-shaped desk, placed in a darkened room. With the aid of a thin metal armature, cables, and clamps, Sze had laboriously built up this bureau with a crowded, condensed covering of artistic and domestic materials, from painting and office supplies to disposable water bottles. This sprawl was combined with modestly scaled light effects and video projections that allowed the piece's studio-like setting to cast a wide symbolic net, which encompassed the pandemic, the politics surrounding it, and our need to carve out a niche for critical consciousness amid the onslaught of information and fear that surrounds our solitary live-work spaces.

As in much of Sze's art, initial impressions of disorder gave way to a sense of strategic and intricate organization: One of several systemic features within her wiry, jury-rigged terrain was painted pieces of paper, ripped into strips and shards, with the fragments frequently serving as screens for fleeting projected images of nature, including a bird's head, a shimmering expanse of water, a running leopard, constellations, and cloud patterns. In works reminiscent of Lee

Krasner's torn-paper-and-paint collages from the mid- to late 1950s, Sze may be expressing a need for creative renewal, associated with prior (and repeated) failures and frustrations, as likely many of us are during this dark period. In a similar vein, some desk-based screens depicted a cursor moving slowly along the scarred blue-and-green surface of a map. This attempt at navigation could be read metaphorically, as part of a struggle to search for meaning remotely.

Elsewhere on the same tabletop were signs that survival necessitates activating whatever natural phenomena are at hand: A potted plant was placed next to a tiny electric fan and a bowl of water lying on a mirror, causing this reflected tableau to pulse and vibrate. Sze juxtaposed this humble harnessing of the elements (air, moisture, electric current) with more conventional artistic material (such as stacks of plastic paint containers) and household stuff (mayo jars, a soda can, a loose scattering of Advil). Audio was also an aspect: Along with the museum's ventilation system, what sounded like slowed-down recordings of machinery—dropping, knocking—reverberated throughout the century-old, brick-and-mortar museum, a former aluminum factory. In addition, low-res video projections—of a stick touching some kind of liquid, of “snow” on an old television set, of rippling water—were cast from the desk and extended across gallery walls and floor. Such stretched imagery encouraged questioning about what a creative gesture can be during troubled times, when our very perceptions of temporality have become warped. Indeed, these aural snippets and fragmented images may have been an attempt to invoke what humanity used to be, and what we have lost: politically, ethically, morally, ecologically.

Sze's associations between prolonged isolation and analog accretion may be read as a response to an authoritarian regime. As such, the work recalls Ilya Kabakov's installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985, which depicts a murky late-Soviet flat crammed with scavenged material, along with a gaping hole in the ceiling. Kabakov's work, like Sze's, contains a kernel of hope—specifically about a person's ability to industriously craft a mental and physical space that is partially rooted in the real. Sze's project has a renewed relevancy in our Covid era, with its varying levels of digital dependency, growing sense of alienation and oppression, and its reference to the rapid (re)circulation of (mis)information. While one was struck by the simplicity of individual qualities in Sze's display, the sense of devoted accumulation and laborious detail was what resonated as a fully committed, low-tech, and homegrown strategy. What ultimately prevailed was the intimate effect of *Images in Debris* as an essentially analog event, reflecting a level of care and contemplation that could only be appreciated on-site. Sze's project envisions slow time in the face of an ever-accelerating and deceptive online and digitized world. And such slippages between fact and fiction have real-life consequences for us—now more than ever.