

Art in America

June/July 2008

LOS ANGELES

Danica Phelps at Sister

Danica Phelps made art to order for this quiet but provocative show, "The Brown Stripe Factory." She devised a transparent system of commercial exchange that was nevertheless dense with personal and social implication. Patrons could commission paintings of rows of stripes, to their exact specifications. Phelps charged by the stripe (15 cents each), and the gallery doubled as a factory showroom, with samples of completed works on display: a panel with 50,000 stripes measured roughly 2 feet square; another, with 100,000 stripes, was twice the size and presented vertically.

The enterprise could perhaps seem soulless, but Phelps has always interwoven the logistical and the intimate, the mundane and the poignant, and "The Brown Stripe Factory" was no exception.

Danica Phelps: *50,000 Stripes*, 2007, watercolor, gouache and pencil on paper on wood, 25 inches square; at Sister.



For the past 10 years, her work has emerged from the details of her life: making and selling art, gathering with friends, caring for her dog and sustaining a loving relationship with her domestic partner. She annotated drawings of her quotidian activities with a visual accounting of her finances for the day, week or month: a green stripe for every incoming dollar and a red one for every dollar spent.

Several years ago, Phelps started to make works composed only of stripes, still reflective of her income's ebb and flow. In her current work, the stripes "come unmoored" from her personal data, as Phelps puts it, and exist instead as units of production. They are painted in eight colors deriving from the palettes of income (green) and expenses (red)—blood, sepia, umber, grayish green—on paper that is cut into narrow bands and adhered to wood panels. Phelps hired assistants to help execute the work, and they signed the end of each completed strip. The signatures remain visible on the right edge of the panels, where the strips wrap around the wood. A lyrical contour drawing in the show depicts a group of women at work on the stripes, focused on their tasks or amiably exchanging tools. A separate, small installation further fleshed out the process of production, with its casual array of handwritten notes, work schedules and color charts.

With the stripe factory work, Phelps infused the tired subject of art's commodification with fresh accessibility and poetic immediacy. She shifted attention from overarching systems to the basic facts of individual labor and exchange. Her paintings are abstractions with both feet in the concrete world. Only slightly less intimate than her more diaristic work, the stripe paintings act as chronicles, too—of their own making; of the diligent, repetitive work of the hand; and of the creation of a structure that imbues that work with real value.

—Leah Ollman