

I N M A N G A L L E R Y

Yevgeniya Baras and Julia Haft-Candell: *Parts of Speech*

Clare Elliott

Parts of Speech presents the art of two women, Yevgeniya Baras, a painter currently living and working in New York, and Julia Haft-Candell, a ceramicist based in Los Angeles. The two artists, previously unfamiliar with one another, share no official affiliation— no common artistic mentor, or school, or even the coincidence of geography. They nonetheless approach art making in a similar, intuitive manner incorporating universal themes and producing irreverent, tactile works that occupy a space somewhere between the abstract, the symbolic, and the mythical.



Installation image of Yevgeniya Baras and Julia Haft-Candell: *Parts of Speech*

Yevgeniya Baras crafts modest, layered canvases that straddle the line between painting and relief. In addition to the traditional media of oil paint and canvas, she uses a variety of materials like burlap, yarn, paper, pulp, wood, and stones to construct her paintings. The embedded matter often includes objects found by, or gifted to, the artist. The artist obtains burlap, for example, from her parents, who purchase supplies for their garden in burlap sacks. These added materials not only

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give the pictures' surfaces their characteristic layered appearance, but actually insinuate physical traces of the artist's biography without revealing any specific detail. Similarly, Baras incorporates traces of writing into her abstract paintings, using numerals as well as letters from both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets (the artist is bilingual in English and Russian). The presence of such recognizable forms compels the viewer to decipher them, or at least to try. These

attempts are typically frustrated, though meaningful to the artist, the characters rarely cohere into any type of legibility. In a repudiation of the slick, screen-based tendency to overshare, Baras's work remains reticent, but ultimately achieves the intimacy that eludes social media.



Yevgeniya Baras, *Untitled*, 2017-2019
Oil, wood, and paper pulp on canvas, 16 x 20 inches



Julia Haft-Candell, *Torus and Arch Orange, Violet*, 2020
Ceramic, 20 x 12 ½ x 6 ½ inches

Despite their modest size, Baras typically completes a painting over the course of several years, sometimes as many as 10. Thus, these works contain an unfolding of time and likewise demand the viewers' time. Time is an element inherent to the ceramic process used by Julia Haft-Candell, in which each work, after being formed, is bisque fired, cooled, glazed and then fired a second time. Haft-Candell further lengthens the process, adding additional glaze firings to her process. An element of chance is introduced at each step as the glazes dry in unpredictable ways.

The object-like qualities of Baras's canvases are reinforced by the presence of Haft-Candell's fully three-

dimensional sculpture. Haft-Candell uses ceramic, a material too often consigned to craft or commercial applications, to explore and challenge any number of binaries. Each of her latest sculptures presents a chaotic, mucky mass with one or more orderly passages of carefully carved black clay. Works from this series embody several additional opposing qualities: fast and slow, glazed and matte, expression and restraint. The tidier, carved elements are marked with cross-hatched patterns that recall the net-like fringes and burlap supports found on many of Baras's paintings. While the prominent 20th century art theorist Rosalind Krauss declared the grid "a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition,"¹ for Haft-Candell this pattern represents one of humanity's earliest binaries—warp and weft—the basic components that weave fibers into fabric.

Implicit throughout Haft-Candell's exploration of contrasting qualities is an interest in scrutinizing gender binaries. The artist has made these issues explicit in a glossary (available to read at www.juliahaftcandell.com) where she details her thoughts about the meanings behind the forms that she is drawn to create in clay. Coincidentally, Haft-Candell's glossary evokes a similar lexicon assembled in the 1960s by Texas visionary artist Forrest Bess after studying his own abstract painting. Remarkably Bess's *Primer of Basic Primordial Symbolism*, as he called it, communicates concerns with unifying disparate qualities, particularly the masculine and feminine, that echo Haft-Candell's. Viewers familiar with Bess's tough little abstractions will no doubt find visual parallels in the Baras's paintings: unexpected combinations of color, painterly textures that emphasize materiality, and biomorphic shapes and patterns that float ungrounded as though in their own universe.

Though not traditionally figurative, Bess's paintings and writings were permeated with references to the body, another parallel seen in the work of the artists on view. Skeins of impasto spread vein-like over the surface of Baras's canvas, the paint itself like blood, or viscera, while the irregular, ovoid shapes suggests vital organs. Some of Haft-Candell's works sprout arms and hands that variously reach out from, or attempt to grasp onto, the amorphous craggy forms that support them. The textural qualities of each artist's work combined with these bodily references resonate with the deeply human yearning for touch, particularly acute in this moment of social distancing.

The title of the exhibition, *Parts of Speech*, refers to the grammatical rules that categorize words according to the function they perform in a sentence. In a way, it is an apt description, as both artists employ means that appear elemental, or even primordial, to communicate the complexities of our current condition. Though removed by half a century from an artist like Forrest Bess, Baras and Haft-Candell continue the endeavor that he, and perhaps all artists attempt: to express the ineffable, defying the logic inherent to grammar and transcending the limitations of language.

ⁱ Krauss, Rosalind. "Grids." *October* 9 (1979): 51-64, p. 51.

Clare Elliott is Associate Research Curator at the Menil Collection, Houston, and author of *Forrest Bess: Seeing Things Invisible* (2013).

Yevgeniya Baras (born Syzran, Russia) is a painter working in New York, NY. She received her MFA in Painting and Drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007, as well as two degrees from the University of Pennsylvania: a BA in Fine Arts and Psychology and an MS in Education in 2003. Baras has received several awards, including a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (2018), a Chinati Residency in Marfa, TX (2018) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2019).

Julia Haft-Candell (born Oakland, CA) is a sculptor working in Los Angeles, CA. She received her BA in studio art and international relations from the University of California, Davis in 2005 and her MFA from California State University, Long Beach in 2010. Haft-Candell was awarded a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Madison, ME (2016) and has received multiple grants from the Center for Cultural Innovation (2012 and 2016) and the California Community Foundation Fellowship (2019).

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