

Information

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Artist Interview: Julie Oppermann



Art-Rated's Sarah Hall got to sit down with artist Julie Oppermann, these questions come from an interview that took place in May, 2013 in Berlin.

AR: I'm here visiting you in your new Berlin studio. You've just moved here from New York haven't you?

JO: Yeah, fresh off the boat, I moved here in February. The first couple of months were really dark, cold, and brutal. I had a lot of second thoughts about leaving New York, which has been home for the last 12 years, but now that spring has arrived and the sun is shining, things are making a lot more sense.

AR: Apparently it was one of the coldest winters in Berlin's recorded history. Nice introduction to the city! So if it wasn't the weather, what made you decide to move to Berlin; do you feel like your work has a greater affinity with what is happening in Berlin?

JO: I don't really feel that my work is aligned with any particular geographical place or school. I'm not sure I could definitively say what is happening in Berlin, as I've only been here a few months. I know there are a lot of artists here, and I'm not sure they fall into any one particular category. One thing that I have noticed here is an interest in "digital culture" and the intersections between art, science and technology. Artists like Olafur Eliasson and Carsten Nicolai make relevant and interesting work in that vein, and are both based out of Berlin.

AR: I'm a fan; they both make interesting work, and I agree with your observation about Berlin's interest in the digital – it's reflected in art and music here. Although hand-made paintings really have nothing to do with science and technology, in fact you could say they are the antithesis to it, your work does reflect a certain kind of logic that might be associated with those disciplines. I was struck by this visual logic when first saw your work, and then I looked at your CV. You have a background in Neurobiology?

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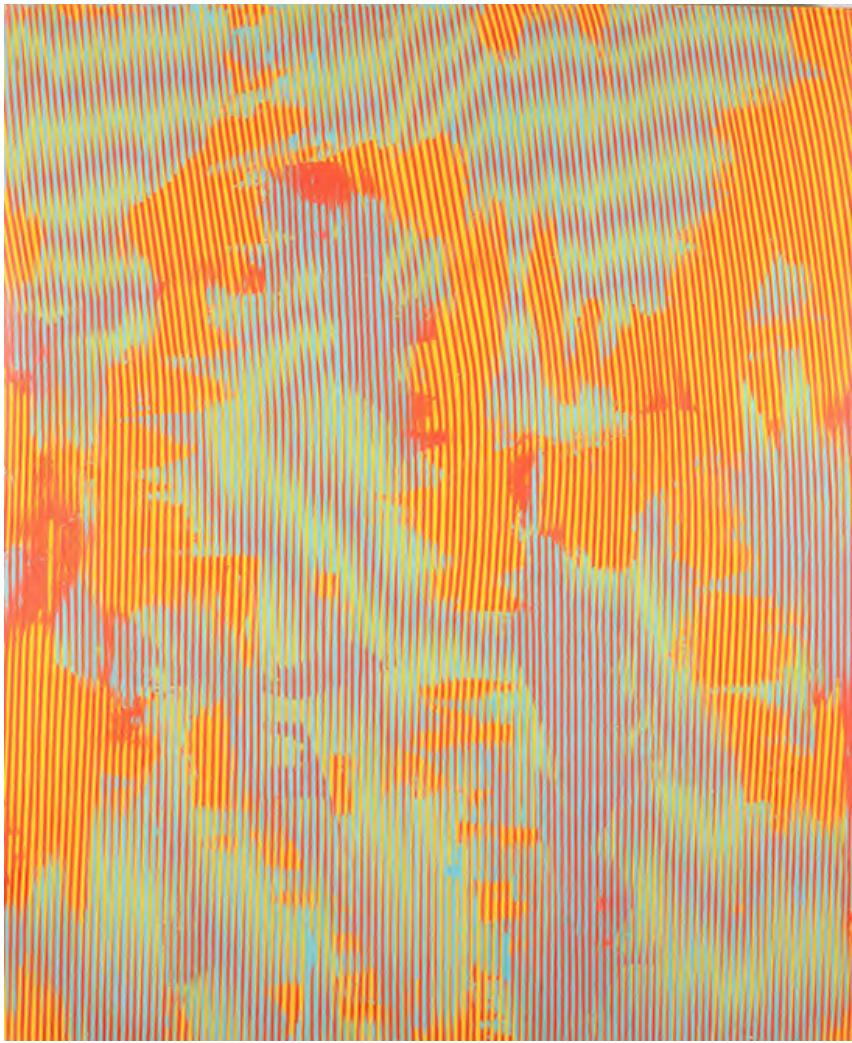
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JO: Yeah, I have a Master's in Neuroscience from U.C. Berkeley. A lot of people hear that and think that I'm a brain surgeon...

AR: [laughs] that thought must confuse people initially ...Neurologist/Artist? ... Okay, but just to make sure I am getting this straight, before getting your degree in Neuroscience (not Neurology) you completed a BFA at Cooper Union?

JO: [laughs] That is also correct, yeah I do have a lot of degrees.

AR: What I find most intriguing, is that you started in Fine Art, switched to Science, and then came full circle – you just received your MFA from Hunter College this past year.

JO: Well life is always surprising. Actually I always wanted to be an Artist, but in a moment of panic after finishing my BFA and not knowing what to do next, I ended up enrolling in a pre-med curriculum at the “advice” of my Father. Indeed it turned out that Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Calculus, – all the classes I avoided in high school, were actually quite interesting! Organic Chemistry was my favorite; it involves a lot of visual reasoning – I was really good at doing ring flips and rotating molecular structures in my head.

Anyway, coasting on my newly-discovered scientific aptitude, I decided that the logical trajectory would be to continue on to graduate school. Neuroscience was a field that really appealed to me, combining my interest in psychology with an understanding of biological systems – how to investigate and understand the mind, by learning about the brain. That, in a nutshell, is the back-story of how I ended up in a PhD program at UC Berkeley.

AR: But obviously, that was not the end of the story.... I'm curious if there was an event or specific moment when you realized you wanted to explore your ideas through visual art instead of science?

JO: Right, so the next chapter begins at Berkeley, where I quickly realized that I was more excited by the big ideas and questions of Neuroscience, less by the day-to-day practice of laboratory research. In light of the recently released season of Arrested Development, we could sum this moment up, in the words of GOB, as "I've made a HUGE mistake." At that point I knew, definitively, what I wanted to do with my career. Rather than drop out, I continued in the program in order to complete a Master's thesis. From that point on, however, I spent my nights and weekends in the studio, rather than the laboratory, developing a new body of work – my first series of moiré paintings. Two years later I submitted my thesis, and returned to New York to attend the Hunter College MFA program.



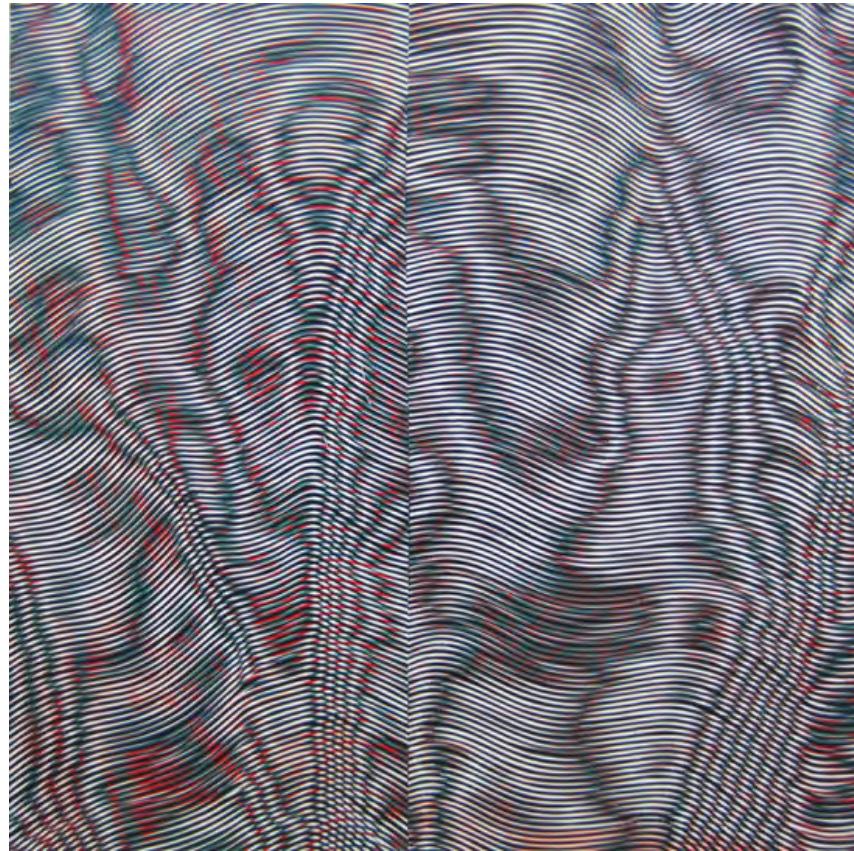
AR: This is great, because it sets up my next question, which is whether you find that your background in Neuroscience influences your artistic practice? Certainly for me looking at your work, I feel like I can see a connection. Is this something you are consciously working on, to address the questions through your art? Or am I reading too much into it?

JO: Oh absolutely, the connection is there. I think my time at Berkeley really changed my work, but I have to say that I didn't notice the connection right away. It actually happened my first semester at Hunter. I was taking a course called Color Seminar, and during the first three weeks of class we were assigned a lot of reading about the neurobiology of the visual system. I had this ah-ha moment where it all came together and I could suddenly see the connections between what I had been doing at Berkeley and what I was working on in my studio. It started with the idea that 'seeing' happens in the brain, not the retina. In the end it was all related to perception, which is really just a starting point – how do we interpret what we see, how do we construct meaning, how can a visual experience, such as looking at an abstract painting, affect us physically and emotionally?

AR: I've noticed that the optical effects that occur in your work can be both compelling and sometimes disorienting. The image may appear to simultaneously recede and project into space or what is actually static may seem to physically vibrate.

JO: Definitely, that's a good description. When people see my paintings in person for the first time they frequently report a dizzying or disorienting sensation. Part of this is the sheer scale of the works, which is what I am going for – a painting that is bigger than you, that encompasses your field of vision – this affects you on a different level than some of

my smaller works on paper or panel would. And aside from the scale, of course, they are – call it as you wish – optical, perceptual, or psychedelic – I like to say that they make your eyes bleed.

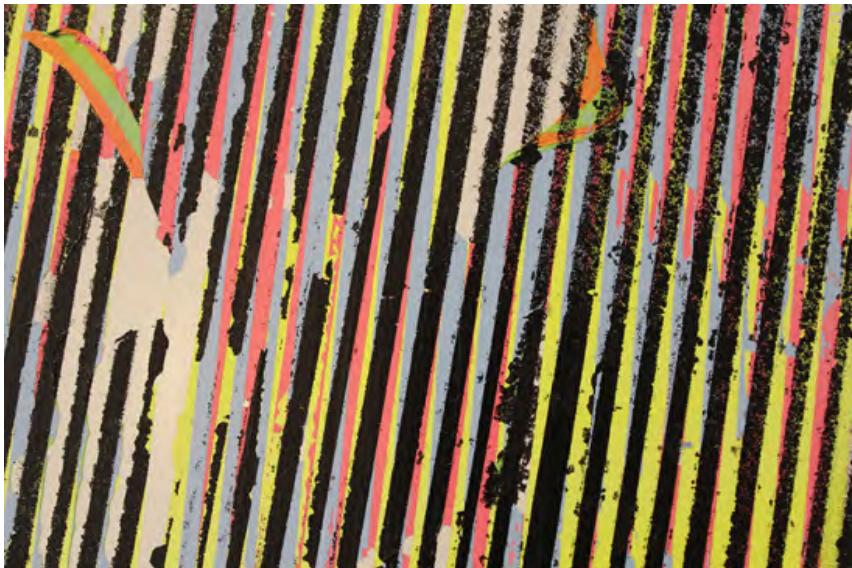


AR: Would you say that you play with the viewers' perception to provoke questions about what they are seeing?

JO: I would say that when you look at my paintings you see yourself seeing. They are hard to look at. After-images and simultaneous contrast create sensations of movement, flashes and flickers of light, illusions of depth and space, uncomfortable tensions. If you look at them for a while they literally start moving, and you end up blinking and wondering what is going on – you are watching your visual system bug out. It is overwhelmed by the information coming in, and is having trouble figuring out how to process it. That's pretty cool to recognize, because most of the time we don't give this any thought, we just assume that what we are seeing is true.

AR: Here's something else I've noticed: the visual distortion that happens in your work sometimes creates a visual noise that almost seems audible. Is there an intended relationship between the visual interference that happens in your work and sound?

JO: It is not intended but it's definitely interesting. I like the idea of eliciting a sensory cross-talk, like a visual experience so powerful you can hear it! It also makes me wonder what these paintings would sound, taste or smell like to people with different forms of synesthesia.



AR: Your use of curving line patterns, the emphasis on color, and the optical effects that happen in your work make me wonder if Bridget Riley is a name you hear a lot?

JO: Bridget Riley was a really great artist, and she is definitely one of my painting heroes. Her work is super smart and visually captivating. What many people don't know is that she was also an excellent writer. In her essay, *The Pleasures of Sight*, she describes her earliest, formative visual experiences from her childhood in Cornwall. I think it should be essential reading for all visual artists. Somehow the appreciation for the visual has been largely disregarded in contemporary art criticism. There was an essay I read recently by William Agee, in the *Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions* exhibition catalog that framed this very eloquently. He writes:

"A generation of art, permeated by conceptualism and theory, has devalued the power of the visual; like color itself, as well as art, painting that provides visual pleasure has been seen as too easy, too simple, lacking in "intellectual" depth." He goes on to challenge these assertions, maintaining, "The visual is profound, for it is how we see and thus how we comprehend the world. To fail to understand the power of the visual is the failure to understand the very nature of art itself."

AR: Yeah, it's a sad thing that the visual has been demoted in visual art.

JO: I think that's a really important passage, and I remember how it struck me when I read it the first time. It expresses something that I understand implicitly, something fundamental about why I make the work that I do, what makes it important, and how I intend for it to be received. To me, the visual system is indeed one of the most primary ways in which we interface with the world; it's the part of the brain used to gather information that directly influences our thoughts, emotions, decisions, awareness and consciousness. Thinking about it this way, how could anyone deny its relevance and urgency in contemporary art?

AR: This is something I think about a lot myself – how a lot of art criticism belies a prejudice against work that is not textual, literary or directly related to conceptual theory.

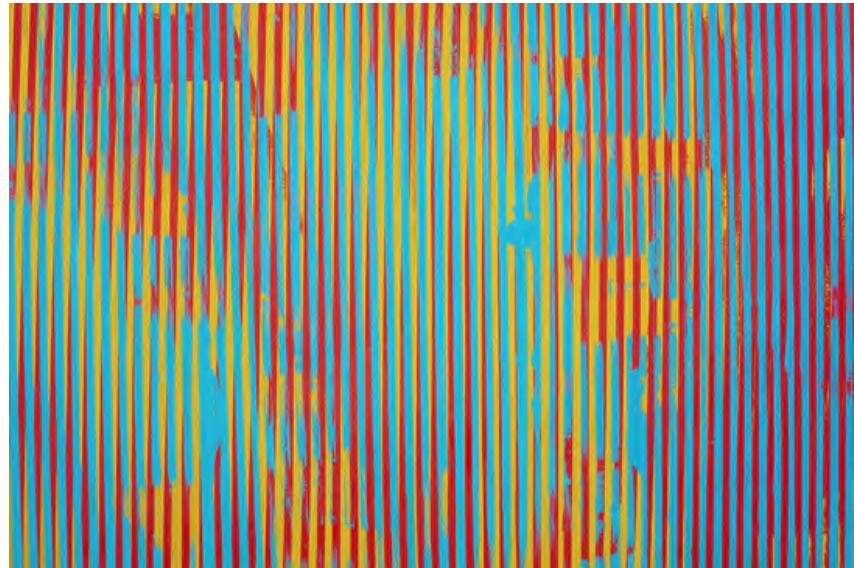
JO: Yeah and against color too! There's a book, *Chromophobia* by David Batchelor, that talks about this as a cultural phenomenon, placing it alongside the development of Western intellectual thought, and tracing it back to the ancient Greeks. So clearly this is an interesting topic to consider, and perhaps helps to explain some of the problematic assumptions and prejudices that inform the value judgements and critical interpretations of contemporary art.

But to get back to the Bridget Riley point, there was one other thing I wanted to say.

Maybe it is obvious, but I do think that my work is distinct in many ways, ideologically and formally, from the Op art of the 60's.

AR: Right, let's talk about that for a moment.

JO: For me, the distinction would be my emphasis on what I call interference which is central to my work. It is the idea that different, conflicting ideas and impulses exist simultaneously – and I mean that both formally and conceptually. What this means is that I allow and even embrace the contradictions, incongruences, and glitches within my work. I am not going after a singular vision, but allowing the works to be complex and layered – for them to simultaneously evoke different types of responses and experiences.



I value the “hand” or physical gesture in my work. I allow the paint to bleed, smudge, peel back at times, which disrupts the illusory or pictorial space, emphasizing the materials and surface instead. Some people think these are careless, unconsidered errors, I have even been asked to “repair” these marks in a painting. In fact, it is just the opposite: they are indispensable and integral to the work. After all, if I wanted them to be perfect I could just make vector drawings in Adobe Illustrator and call it a day, right?

AR: Well that brings me to my next question: I was hoping you could speak to the question of why painting with your work. Why not use other formats to explore these ideas?

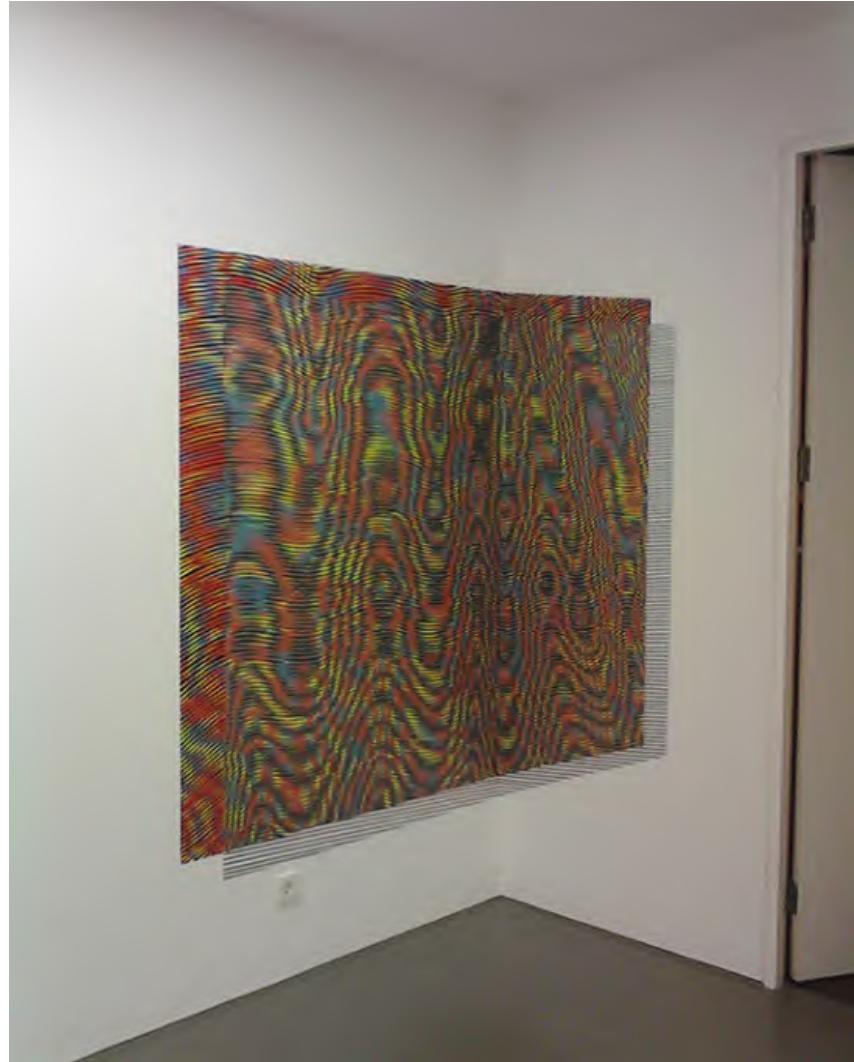
JO: That's a valid question because in many ways these ideas would be interesting to explore through video, animation, and installation. And because of that, the decision for these to be paintings becomes meaningful in and of itself. I guess what I really like about painting is that it has such a defined set of rules and limitations. For me, it is precisely because of these limitations that it can be so radical. The excitement comes when you push against the limitations to make something new and surprising.

AR: Can you give a specific example of this in your work?

JO: Of course. I think we've actually talked about a few of these points earlier. For example – the way in which I construct illusions of depth and space, where certain patterns seem to float in front of others, screens of lines that you are looking through, into another internal space. In fact, the painting is flat, and I'm not using any conventional pictorial tools such as a horizon line, perspective, or representational imagery – they are purely abstract in nature. Also the works evoke a sensation of vibration and movement, creating a temporal element – the flickering between the white and black lines also recalls the shutter between frames in a film. But there is no actual

movement, because the painting hangs inertly on the wall, and there is no animation or video, the patterns are static – the only changes that occur are in the viewer's perception.

AR: Actually, the first work I saw of yours was one of your wall paintings and I was immediately intrigued. These are paintings, but you might also call them installations, and there's an obvious dialogue created between two and three dimensional space. In the wall paintings, your paint application is flat and without modulation and because they are on the wall and not a canvas it negates any possibility of the painting becoming an object or having dimensionality; but then to contradict this you let the image spill onto the floor as a reflection or bend around the corner of a wall, thereby placing it in a three dimensional space that intrudes into the viewer's arena. I'm wondering at what point you started making wall paintings and where they fit into the chronology of your work? What are your thoughts about a painting as an object versus painting as a flat picture plane?



JO: Good questions. I started the wall installations while at Hunter, and have kept making these in parallel with my works on canvas. I like how playful they can be, and that I can address spatial illusions very explicitly. What happens when a painting started on one plane intersects with another? I think these paintings deal with geometry and space more directly than the works on canvas, and they present a certain lightness and humor less pronounced in my other, more "serious" paintings. Two projects I would really like to realize one day, would be an entire room installation – painting directly on all the walls, floor and ceiling, and an installation in which wall paintings were created and installed in direct dialogue with works on canvas.

AR: Ok one last question, before this interview gets too long. We've touched on a lot of really interesting points so far – the last thing I am interested in is how you connect this work outside of itself, how it is relevant in 2013? Something that strikes me is that there is so much information packed into one of your images that it can be difficult to look at. It seems like the overwhelming sensory information makes it hard to focus or concentrate, almost forces you to look away – it's like you are intentionally provoking a form of Attention Deficit Disorder in the viewer. I'm wondering if you intend for the distracting optical flicker to be an analogy for other things in contemporary culture?

JO: Well, how to answer that. ADHD is a good starting point, since you brought that up; I think that is an acutely relevant contemporary idea, arguably a defining characteristic of our generation. Computers, the internet, smart phones, social networking, all of these technologies are profoundly changing the ways that we interact, how we learn, what we remember, how we see and hear and think and feel. We have access to so much information that we didn't have before, at the click of a mouse, and I think that we also have evidence that attention spans are getting shorter, distractibility is increasing, and breadth of knowledge and the ability to multi-task is increasingly valued or rewarded, at least in the short-term, over depth of understanding and narrow expertise.

So I could argue that the optical flicker evoked in my paintings is analogous to the experience of staring into a computer screen, one could argue that the line-based interference patterns I work with reference the distortions created through digital image compression, speaking to the jpeg, and perhaps the flat application of paint and the ways in which I set up optical color mixtures references the flatness of a monitor, and the RGB or CMYK color space. Conversely, you might argue that the celebration of the 'hand' or the accident in my work is instead a rebellion against the computer. So a question might be, are my paintings part and parcel to this, or do they offer a critique? Well my answer would be yes, and yes. All of these arguments are valid, and it isn't a question of it being one or the other. Interference, there it is.

Julie Oppermann is an artist from New York City who recently moved to Berlin, Germany. She received her BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art , and a Master's in Neuroscience from The University of California, Berkeley. In 2012 she completed residencies at FAAP in São Paulo at UdK in Berlin, and received her M.F.A. at Hunter College. She was recently part of a group show at Margaret Thatcher in NYC. She recently had a Project Room exhibition at Mark Moore Gallery in Culver City, CA, during the summer of 2013.

Oppermann shows with Galerie Stefan Roepke in Cologne.

For more information please visit - <http://www.julieoppermann.com>

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Sarah Elise Hall is a New York-based artist and writer. Her work has been exhibited with Janinebean Gallery (Berlin), the Drabinsky Gallery (Toronto), MUSE CPMI Center for Photography and the Moving Image (New York), Islip Art Museum, (Islip, NY) and Galerija Zvono (Belgrade). Her work has been reviewed in Toronto's National Post and Toronto Star, New York's Huffington Post, and included in Michael Petry's book, Nature Morte, published by Thames & Hudson Press. Sarah is also a contributing writer for Eyes Towards the Dove.

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