

Set and Setting

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I. Stage Set

Sarah Crowner's *The Sea, the Sky, a Window* is a glowing example of the artist's visual theater. As soon as you enter the Hill Art Foundation, Crowner's painting *Rotated two-way Arabesque* (2015) greets you like a flashing arrow, or a good usher, directing your gaze directly down the hall, where a sculpture by Cy Twombly is framed against an expansive field of blues. When your body catches up, your eyes will freely wander across multiple Twombly works, immersed in the environment created by Crowner's new suite of paintings *The Sea, the Sky, a Window 1, 2, and 3* (all 2023). Though the paintings are hung on separate, stand-alone walls—punctuated by views of auto shops, art galleries, various other businesses, and the architecture of the High Line—they also function as a single, monumental landscape. The careful seaming of modulated color panels throughout, and the purposeful alignments of bare canvas at each work's top, produce an epic horizon line against which the artist's midnight, cobalt, and cerulean forms coalesce and flow across the city vistas.

Crowner's paintings also unapologetically present themselves as backdrops for Twombly's artworks, like a playful inversion of Barnett Newman's mid-century dictum that "sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting." Her turning of the sculpture-painting relationship into an actor-setting relationship is informed by her career-long explorations of the proscenium stage: ranging from interactive sets for experimental theater productions to art exhibitions built with the stage as their inspiration, as well as costumes and sets designed for contemporary ballets.¹ Certain Twombly sculptures, like *Untitled* (1997) and *Untitled* (2009), invite you to see them in the round, activated at every turn by Crowner's gradating colors, while others, such as *Madame d'O* (1999), behave like good dancers, with a self-possessed frontality that stops you in your tracks.

In this gallery, you might be reminded of the mysterious archaeological space of Twombly's studio, captured in numerous photo studies by the artist himself, where sculptures and fragments, bathed in white, take shape against the agitated cyan seas of his

history paintings. But there's also a sense of the young Twombly as captured by his friend Robert Rauschenberg, standing dutifully beside his early sculptures like a director introducing a troupe of performers. As with her own artwork, so with others: Crowner tends to prize open spaces and timelines so you can pause between inside and outside, or between early and late.

Each space in the Hill Art Foundation is animated by these patterns, led in part by Crowner's study of the Italian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa. There are vistas where complex three-dimensional objects turn into striking two-dimensional shapes, and then back again. There are formal juxtapositions that patiently relish the inherent materiality of each artwork. And there are mini-theaters filled with narrative tensions and historical connections. Among Scarpa's contributions to mid-century exhibition design, and one of Crowner's main inspirations for this project, was his renovation of Sicily's Palazzo Abatellis in the mid-1950s, following its destruction in World War II. In a room featuring alabaster busts by the medieval sculptor Francesco Laurana, Scarpa introduced hand-carved wooden bases and tonal backdrops of blue and green to bring out the vibrancy of the sculptural material and the subtle work of the artist's hand. "Scarpa's work," Crowner explains, "is really painterly. To choose such strong colors to frame sculpture is a gesture that emphasizes the silhouettes better than a white wall ever could. I'm searching for the right blues so you won't lose any line, any wiggle, any edge."² Such close attention to Twombly's line also doubles back, heightening Crowner's haptic sense of refinement in her own work.

Like Scarpa's spatial innovations, Crowner's artistic operations wield the power of natural light in accordance with the luminous quality of the artwork itself, moving from feelings of enclosure to a sense of expansiveness.³ You'll be pulled, for example, by another striking sightline into the gallery adjacent to Crowner's Twombly interventions, and a related color field. Beatrice Caracciolo's painting *Untitled* (2016), which can be seen here to transfigure the feverish lines of Twombly's early paintings, hangs above Crowner's *Platform (Sky Blue Pentagon)* (2023), a tessellated, site-specific sculpture composed of hundreds of handmade terra-cotta tiles in tints and shades of blue. You'll notice that the platform abuts a window that overlooks the High Line. At certain times of day, it will reflect in the window and extend, with a sense of endlessness, parallel to the

bustling pedestrian walkway. Or the platform's glossy tiles will refract the sun and bathe the space in subtle glows that recast it in many variations.

Crowner's search for such dynamism builds on recent experiments in which she uses light not simply to set the scene, but to keep it in motion, such as her ambience-altering platform for the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, or her exhibition at the Lina Bo Bardi–designed Casa de Vidro in São Paulo. Bo Bardi is another of Crowner's architectural muses, celebrated for using glass to illuminate objects from multiple vantage points, foreground an object in relation to its supports, and foster continuous relationships between art and life.⁴ In the architect's glass house, Crowner explains, "I saw what a single painting can do at a given time of day. Sometimes it's backlit and extra present. Other times, there is a warm glow from the sunset. Still other times, light hits the painting through the rustling leaves and there is dancing on the face of the painting. It's as if the painting is coming alive."

The windows that fill the elegant bronze skeleton of the Hill Art Foundation, built to foster dialogue with the surroundings, serve as another opportunity for Crowner to activate her works' liveliness and articulate the phenomenological aims of her practice. "I've been thinking about the window not only as a metaphor for painting, like that classic Renaissance view of the painting as a window *onto* the world. Paintings and windows are also a kind of staging ground. Through them, we learn so much *about* the world. We pay attention to what's around it, to what's through it. We pay attention to where we are standing, and we might even learn what we have. We negotiate presence, tension, and embodiment."

II. Mindset

Out of Crowner's many sustained dialogues with the stage comes one of her work's most distinguishing features: a dramatic spirit of interchangeability between each of its elements. Consider her 2016 exhibition at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, where she showed a set of monochromatic, biomorphic paintings positioned atop a vast white cement tile platform, attentive to the museum's industrial setting yet assertive of its own space. At this scene's center was a shifting list of protagonists: visitors who stepped on or wheeled up to the elevated ground to meditate on the paintings and the built setting;

the musical performances and ballets that converted the platform into a functional theater; and the paintings themselves, whose crescendoing and decrescendoing forms gestured to the hilly Berkshire landscape visible from nearby windows.⁵ The artist cultivated a forceful give-and-take through concentrated formal rhymes and a circulation of energy between objects, participants, and environments.

Recently, Crowner has been exploring this dynamic further by thinking about a concept from psychedelic therapy that is gaining currency today amid growing interest in the healing power of hallucinogenics: “set and setting.” A psychedelic experience, according to a body of research that has been developing since the 1950s, can be understood as the interplay between the feelings and perceptions that you bring to your trip (your mindset, or “set”) and your relation to the physical, social, and cultural environments in which your trip takes place (your “setting”).⁶ As a way of describing an intentional exchange between your body and its surroundings, the concept of set and setting may also be applied to the art experience. It helps explain how what you bring to an artwork is as impactful as what an artwork brings to you. In Crowner’s art, there is an additional sense of flux, because her settings strive to be as active as the viewers who experience them. Put another way: her sets bring a mindset all their own.

For example, as counterintuitive as it may seem, there are few figures in Crowner’s works that are as dynamic as her grounds. This is as true of the platform grounds that refigure their environments as it is of the artist’s paintings that, at the Hill, initially announce themselves as backdrops. “These blue monochromes might be staged as backdrops, but they are more than backgrounds. They are paintings that replace windows, and that act as windows. What if we think about a Twombly looking at one, or looking through one, onto the city?” Throughout this project, historical sculptures are repeatedly turned this way, unexpectedly, in an address to contemporary painting. Bronze sculptures by Henri Matisse (*Madeleine II* ([1903]) and Claude Lalanne (*Pomme Bouche* [1994]) look to artists like Crowner who interrogate the sites of potential at painting’s grounds. This is the case for the halting presence of Louise Giovanelli’s trompe l’oeil curtains, the thinly rendered monochrome *Pool* (2021), which asserts the subjectivity of theater’s framing devices. And it’s true as well of the sound-absorbing materials in Jennie C. Jones’s painting *Fluid Red Tone (in the break)* (2022), in which objects designed to

“listen” to their environment, now covered in blazing color, emanate their attunement, and aim to sensitize the surrounding artworks and space.

“There are many interconnected reasons to look to art history, and they are really about *how* to look,” Crowner recently suggested. “There are the formal reasons, the first level of interest to any artist. You’re motivated by questions like, ‘How did that shape end up there?’ or ‘Why is that color so good next to that other color?’ This line of questioning often leads to more technical questions like, ‘What construction is underlying this effect?’ And then there’s a meta-level that brings those first levels into conversation with politics and culture. With artists like Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly, and with the community at Black Mountain College in general, I find myself interested in questions like, ‘How did they change the rules of genre?’ or ‘How did they use the most basic qualities of experience to speak to the most fundamental ones?’”

In a preparatory collage she made for this exhibition—one of many examples in which the artist improvises with art history’s narratives to creatively rewire the material of present and past—Crowner cites and transforms another photograph that Rauschenberg took of Twombly from a now-legendary trip to Rome.⁷ She reinterprets an image in which Twombly is captured studiously observing the Colossus of Constantine (fragments that Crowner has herself visited to study in person) by slightly excising Twombly and the sculpture, displacing them from their original positions to reveal a glowing blue gap between the subjects and their surrounds. In this newly revealed ground, in place of those differently scaled figures is a shadow configuration: not of an artist dwarfed by history, but of two figures that are near-equals. And since Twombly, together with Constantine’s hand, are isolated from their ground, they in turn convert into a single unit or subject, and the locus of attention becomes the looking: not just Twombly’s looking, but Crowner’s looking at Twombly’s looking in a connective chain.

“All artists look to other artists. Let’s think about how time works, namely as circular rather than linear.” Crowner’s exhortation resonates with the formal affirmations of circularity made across her work. You’ll see this in the relationship of fragments to wholes, of composition and recomposition, in nearly all of her paintings and sculptures. At the Hill, her polished bronze works *Stones (Pacific)* (2023) refract and alter the shapes of other works, or scatter the light pouring through Spencer Finch’s stained-glass window

Candlelight (CIE 529/418) (2022). Alongside Crowner's impulse to look at looking is her tendency to take abstractions and further abstract them. Such circularity is not a tautology, but rather a reflection of a creative mindset devoted to enacting a higher-order enmeshment of artist, artwork, viewer, and world.

The art historian Yve-Alain Bois once described the animating impulse of Matisse's painting as a search for a kind of "sensorial diffusion" that directs your gaze, only to make it "impossible for your eye to come to rest, to settle in one place."⁸ Like Crowner, Matisse distilled movements into abstractions to keep them moving; he used the viewer's roving eye to create, within his paintings, an accrual of experiences that belong to the entirety of the body rather than to the eye alone. In relation to his long-standing interest in capturing scenes from windows, Matisse once spoke of depicting this kind of presence, a vacillation between transcendence and immanence, by recording "all that lies between the horizon and myself, including myself." Speaking, in this case, of his balcony in Nice, it's as if he was looking into the future, presaging Crowner's New York blues: "I express space and the objects in it as naturally as if I were standing with just the sea and the sky before me, in other words, the simplest things in the world."⁹

Notes

¹ In addition to the works discussed in this essay, other key coordinates of Crowner's work for and with the stage include her set for Alex Waterman's *Vidas Perfectas* (2012); her solo exhibition *The Wave* at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York (2014); and her set and costume designs for Jessica Lang's work for the American Ballet Theatre, *Garden Blue* (2018).

² All quotes attributed to Crowner are from conversations with the author in May and June 2023.

³ Sergio Polano, "Frammento Siciliani," in *Palazzo Abatellis: La Galleria della Sicilia, Palermo, 1953–54*, ed. Sergio Polano (Naples, Italy: Electa, 1989), 30–31.

⁴ Diego Matos, "Blues in Greens, Greens in Blues: Color as Shape, Painting as Architecture," in *Sarah Crowner: Blues in Greens* (São Paulo: Auroras, 2023).

⁵ See Susan Cross, “Beetle in the Leaves,” in *Sarah Crowner*, ed. Susan Cross (New York: Del Monico/Prestel, 2017), 40–43.

⁶ See Timothy Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Kensington, 1964).

⁷ Bartholomew Ryan, “Medium as Medium: A Conversation with Sarah Crowner,” in *Sarah Crowner*, ed. Susan Cross, 20–35.

⁸ Yve-Alain Bois and Greg Sims, “On Matisse: The Blinding; For Leo Steinberg,” *October* 68 (1994): 79. Bois’s writing, especially his essay “From Near as from Afar,” reproduced in *An Oblique Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 177–85, were another guide for Crowner’s thinking around this exhibition.

⁹ Henri Matisse quoted in Bois and Sims, “On Matisse: The Blinding,” 77.