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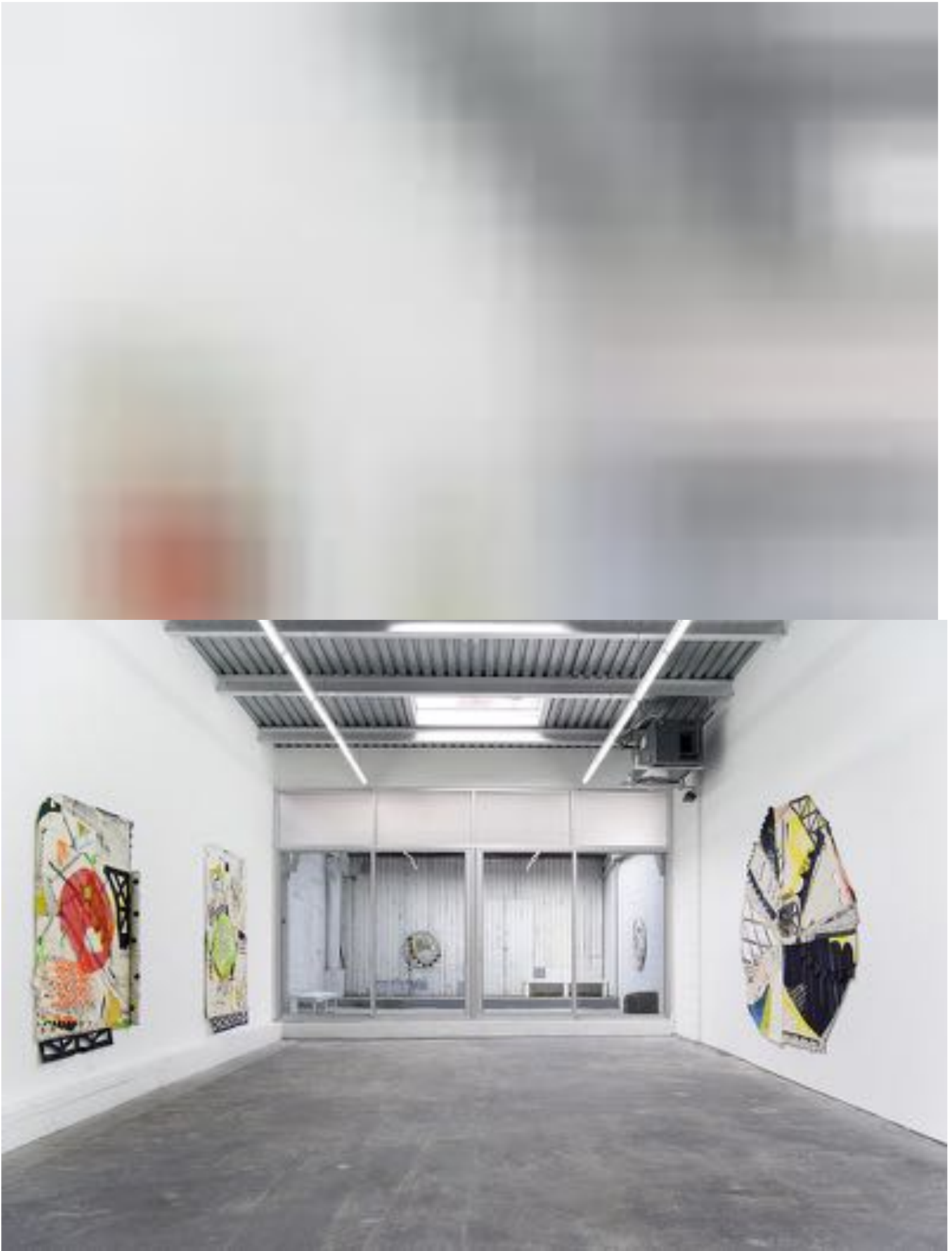
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Jane South: *Halfway Off*

OCT 2023

By Andrew Paul Woolbright



Installation view: *Jane South: Halfway Off*, Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

On View

Spencer Brownstone Gallery*Halfway Off*

September 7–October 21, 2023

New York

Jane South's last exhibition with Spencer Brownstone was the first thing I was able to see after the COVID-19 lockdown was lifted in New York. Her sewn fabric works were paler then, realized in the distanced hues of aging or the cold light of winter. They felt cool and empathetic to that time, like vibrant colors that had been collectively dulled to respectful sympathy; or maybe they felt like premonitions, preserved in the gallery as forgotten flags or hanging fabric slabs and portals. They indexed lost space and time—the recesses of crawlspaces and floor voids. At the time, I wrote about how they felt washed up or crash-landed, new mythology-laden content for a cargo cult. I now think that what I was actually sensing was their stranding—the excess matter of dwellings brought forward like a tragic gravure of a cetacean stranding. They hung with the drag and drape of ripped parachutes, evoking terrestrial return, or the debris of aging Apollo missions. It was a language that held absence close, a haptic lexicon of memory, of shed belief, that recorded and remembered something we hadn't yet realized we had lost.

For her current exhibition *Halfway Off*, South continues to produce from the mind of the hand and its partner, the industrial sewing machine. Between foot and plate, South finds the relational and situational dialectics, tensions, and moments between textures and fibers, discovering synthesis through process. *Neath* (2023) feels like the hinge between the last exhibition and this one. The pivot. It is the one that carries over her previous languages of absence, shed, and architectural memory and returns to South's recurring forms: the circle, the oculus, the hull. It is a vent that reveals openings to the layers of fabric underneath, or the wall itself behind it. John Berger noted that the oculus was the language of oblivion, the infinite and the void in one. South's morphology often drifts between that and the shape of a tablet, a rectangle with rounded corners, that either scribes past our present moment or returns to us the ways we used to feel before the break.





Jane South, *Neath*, 2023. Acrylic, canvas, thread, batting, and mixed media, 76 x 76 inches. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

South's work traverses public and private space, revealed and immanent, and also the hidden and forgotten. The vents and ducts and chambers code the space into quilted organs; it now seems to sprawl out into the city to capture the barriers of construction sites, foreclosed property, and urban renewal. Behind a few of the smaller works, like *Oer* (2023), *Tondi* (2023), and *Wait* (2022), facsimiles of chain-link fences and barriers of the construction site frame and inscribe the soft fabric. It is an organizing or trellising of Koolhaasian Junk Space, the cavities of cities: excavating the voids within cityscape. The most notable evolution in South's work is in her adoption of saturated color. For *Halfway Off*, she's moved on from the pale filter of the previous show and stepped confidently into neon and Day-Glo. This color palette of artificial neon burns; it evokes the carried-over lines of spray-paint markings that guide excavators and jackhammers. The neon orange of South's palette elicits the construction worker sigils of underground power lines and nervous systems of pipes, codes for machines and reminders of pathways of current. There is more vibrancy, shedding their pallor and complicating the work with the lingering intentions of planning, speculating, future build-outs, an idea of progress and the crisscrossing drawing process of workers collaborating to make them happen.

They are still largely achieved by an industrial sewing machine, its pressure flattening the three dimensions into soft-formed silhouette. They may build off the strategies of wall works that saw the possibilities of extending relationships with the body to the wall, extended wall works beyond Albertian windows and beyond painting itself. They develop new possibilities of textural relationships outside of paint, like Gedi Sibony, or have proximity to the strategies of Caroline Achantre. Conceptually, South's interests in the indexing of invisible spaces would curate well with the negative objects of Rachel Whiteread and the voided-out spaces of Gordon Matta-Clark.

However, South importantly maintains subjectivity, the hand, mystery, and chance, allowing for the logics of materials and the ways in which they interact to remain as evidence of the work, in ways others with similar conceptual interests have avoided. She never seems to cover her tracks.



Installation view: *Jane South: Halfway Off*, Spencer Brownstone Gallery, 2023. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

Scale, material, and process are content. The magic of South's work is in the material drifting, the ability she has to load and unload each ingredient's reservoir, to carry lines and movement across radically different elements in ways that look easy. That is the work's vibrancy and mastery, a technical ability shared with artists like Ouatarra Watts or Molly Zuckerman-Hartung to carry a line unencumbered across shifting materials, to carry marks and subjectivity through completely different logics and knowledges of fiber and line, each with their own unique capacity and difference that require its situational negotiation. A lyricism of filaments and fray, her straying thread draws, lingers, and weaves through batting, board, felt, and sheet. It has a language and pleasure of conceptual artists that utilize the index, but South also employs real affect and subjectivity, ambiguity and accident, and the ability for the materials to produce something unexpected in the process of learning them. They are the sincere maneuvers of a fabulist architect, or a Ricardo Bofill reborn as an animist with a thread to replace concrete. Somewhere between the build-out and the void-out, she is able to compress the gesture of the city into condensed form, patchwork and meshwork, into strings vibrating long after the city exhales and breathes new skylines, retracing each of its steps to find the ghosts of previous layouts and new ways forward. I still see heartbreak in them, but now they also carry a crescendo within them—like demolitions in reverse.

Contributor

Andrew Paul Woolbright

Andrew Paul Woolbright is an artist, gallerist, and Editor-at-Large at the Brooklyn Rail, living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Woolbright is an MFA graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design in painting and is the director of the Lower East Side Gallery Below Grand. He currently teaches at Pratt and School of Visual Arts in New York.