

## Maha Saab

Text by Bartholomew Ryan

A Maha Saab exhibition is an experience of sidelong proposals communicated by way of disparate objects in a variety of materials and media. Often there is something awry about what may seem to be given. Abstraction comes coded as figuration; figuration is masked by abstraction. Threads of the historical, cultural or even biographical are not so much clues to meaning as devices for artistic production, pushing one work on to the next in a chain of discontinuous associations. Yet there is specificity to the works that allows them to exist for themselves also in a kind of grateful autonomy. They want to be read in relation, but not if that means they must adopt a style, because if Saab's approach is about anything it is about questioning the notion of settling into something. Or, at least, settling into something more than once. The artist venerates what she refers to as "dirty logic", a sense of realism with a virus, an inability to move towards representation that is not inherently transitioning from legibility to opacity and back again.

The two painted paper sculptures in the exhibition, *Striple* and *Trackers*, take their inspiration from a previous piece *S.D.S. Prop for Science* that was originally made as a prop for a theatrical production. Saab became interested in pursuing this notion of an object developed for one discipline that is translated into another. *Trackers* takes its title from a Sophocles satyr play of which some 400 lines are extant, as if the object is itself just a trace of a larger whole, intimating something grander in scope but forever lost. There is a lyrical quality to the piece, as well as a sense of structural suggestion. When mapped onto theater or the world of a play, it becomes virtually diagrammatic, the two hanging arcs pointing towards something inherent to the movement of a plot. They also intimate the soft lines of post minimalism, or of the medium of painting once it had finally surrendered its support. The strands of painted paper hanging in parallel in *Striple*, (a composite of "stripe" and "triple") derive according to the artists from a number of procedures not unlike imagining what would happen if a Bridget Riley painting were unraveled, or if a play was written based on a Daniel Buren work; A witty and generative approach reminiscent of the poet Leslie Scalapino's claim to have written a work based on *King Lear* without the plot, characters, or language. Saab's logic is entirely sound, while also refusing to stand up to any quantitative measure.

The *Untitled (Air)* drawings composed of pen and sharpie on vellum have a graphic serial quality redolent of print processes, though they clearly bear the mark of the artist's hand. Saab found an abstract image that she liked when revisiting some earlier abstracted sketches she had made. In a studio-bound process, she redrew the image repeatedly by hand until it arrived at the more literal form of the black flower, which she then applied to the vellum. While flowers are often associated with lightness, Saab's have a weighted quality, seeming to hover with some effort within the picture plain.

Many of Saab's pieces play on this discrepancy between an object's actual and seeming mass. The door works made from steel strips welded together are painted in pastels and oils that reduce their sense of weightiness, while also entering them into the pictorial field. They come from Saab's fascination with the architecture of the Lutheran Church of the Deaf in L.A. She worked through her interests in the building by taking numerous photographs, ultimately focusing her attention on the Church's door. But for her, the photography was a form of note taking not an end in itself and lead to a desire to make something concrete. If a door is a portal between contexts, then the steel works can be read as thresholds between the secular and spiritual, art and non-art, sculpture and painting.

Were Saab intent on driving home the door/portal metaphor the objects would hang flat against the wall thereby increasing their legibility. Doors after all are vertical. But, the artist likes to frustrate the terms that she herself has established, as if their actual realization would somehow be a loss. She likes the play of conceptual origin and material realization, where each fulfills and somehow displaces the other. An ongoing conversation to which the viewer can make their own contributions.