



SEPTEMBER 2019

"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## Origins by Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian at Signs and Symbols



*Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian, Origins, Installation view (Photo by Mark Bloch)*

### *Origins*

Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian

signs and symbols

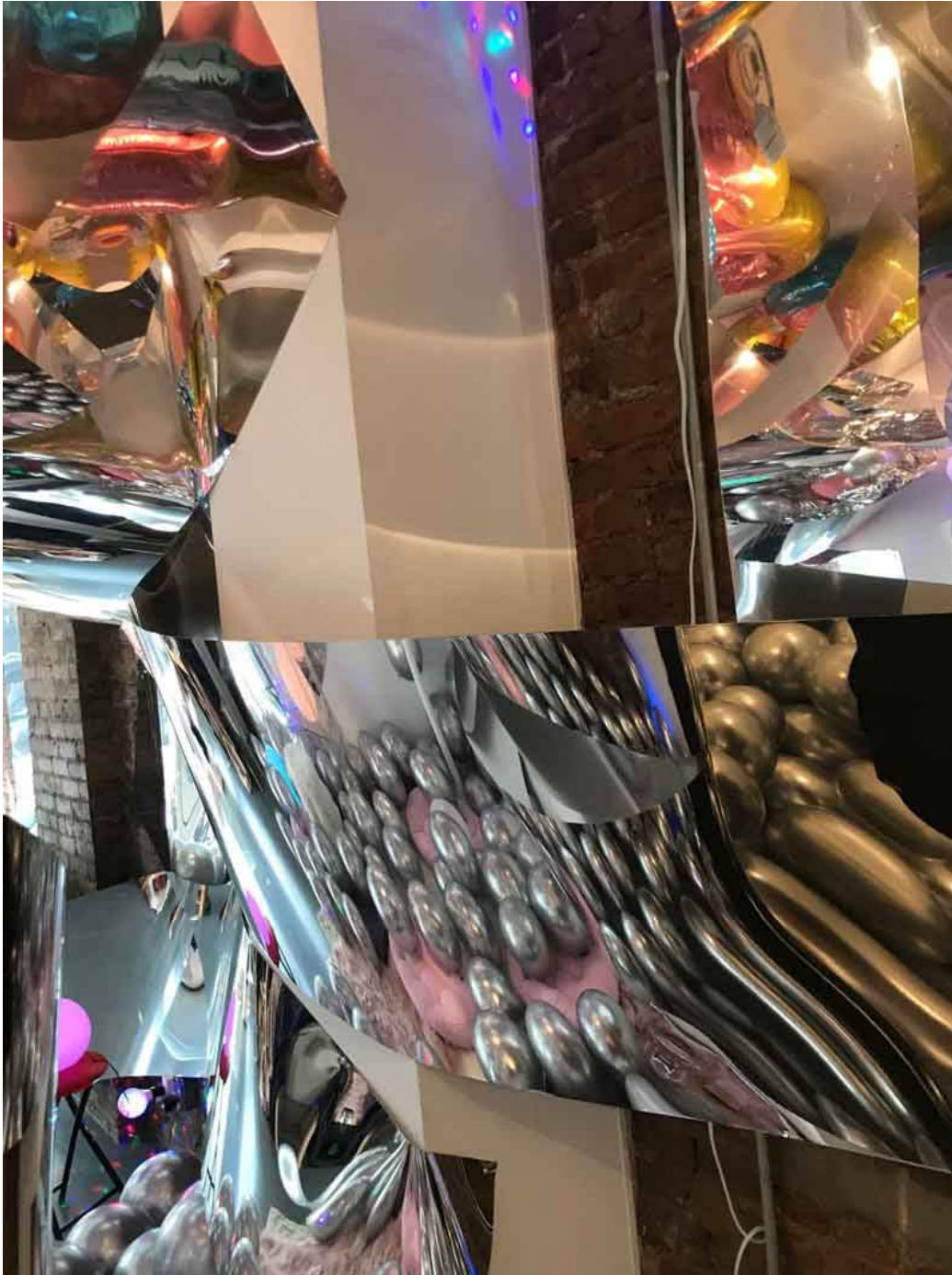
September 4- October 11

**By MARK BLOCH, September, 2019**

"The origin of art is rooted in relationships," Hrag Vartanian said, referring to a five year professional and personal relationship with Sharon Louden, calling their collaboration, "a larger investigation into the notion of origins, whether through the lens of family, childhood, ideology, communication systems, or material culture."

Louden and Vartanian have joined forces to create *Origins*, a co-operative site-specific, installation in a small space on the Lower East Side by two individuals who have been in dialogue for half a decade. Dominated by collaboration and color, their installation is an immersive environment that continues a conversation in public that was advanced privately

when in April 2018, they created a collaborative installation at the Mary Sharpe and Walentas Studio Program in Brooklyn. Now, in addition to the purposeful disarray and overwhelm of the space in which visitors find themselves engulfed, Vartanian has also curated some Louden drawings in the back “room” of the sprawling installation, providing a curatorial “end” to the environment in a corner of the tiny gallery. There, the installation combines the two-dimensional lines Louden is known for, with the results of some writings by and musings by the critic Vartanian, sending each to established roles and familiar territory.



*Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian, Origins, Installation view (Photo by Mark Bloch)*

The result is a transformative cacophony that transcends their roles as creators. The confining gallery walls and cheap manufactured materials used in the installation such as plastic sheeting and balloons, culminate in a playful yet perceptual onslaught. Mirror images of brightly colored strata stare each other down, interrupted only by occasional thin slices of wooden floorboards or brick walls. Reflections from the ceiling and floor compliment each other. Pinks, magentas, blacks, greys, lighter greys, off-whites and golds cascade across reflective aluminum surfaces. The materials wind around each other, reminding one of Richard Serra's "walls" or like undulating versions of Frank Lloyd Wright curves from the Guggenheim Museum.

The environment screams "colorful," but it is surprisingly built mostly of the neutral metallic tones of shiny aluminum sheets Louden has employed in previous work. Looking sometimes like grids of typewriter keys or cartons of eggs and at other times stretched and elongated like stick shifts in a fun house mirror, the effect is one of disorientation. This bafflement provides a rhythmic backdrop to the rest of the bric-a-brac hanging around.

A sky blue band of color somehow stretches across the lower regions of one surface, momentarily creating a glossy kind of bemusement sensation. The silvery inflated orbs roll and bounce like soft ball bearings or liquid metal bubbles. Shimmering clouds or bending wings of reflected color invite us in but also create complicated barriers, waving dangerously like the burnished bad guy in the Terminator movies.

In addition to bands of color, more concentrated hues punctuate the space in occasional bursts. A crystalline white and grey field is framed by the edges of a balloon in the shape of an infinity symbol. A pulse of spectral light is delivered by a simple light bulb while turquoise, pink, and purple balls create interference.



*Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian, Origins, Installation view (Photo by Mark Bloch)*

Bulbous purple and pink shapes that reminded me of fish cross in front of balloons. They function like swarms of tadpoles or sperm swimming upstream or at the bottom of an aquarium. Golds and turquoises bounce off the bright sunlight entering the space from outside, catching clumps of discarded wrapping paper. A white Andy Warhol-like wig projecting the cozy feel of bedroom slippers cries out from under a pile of pink cushions - and yet more balloons.

Louden and Vartanian have packed the contents of the exhibition's walls and ceiling in a manner that reminds one of Marcel Duchamp. I'm referring to Duchamp's coal sacks at the 1938 *Exposition internationale du surrealism* at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Toward the back, a cluster of drawings hover above more silver balloons, casting multiple shadows, even throwing shadows across the drawings themselves. These curated selections are difficult to get to but things can be strewn aside to see more if desired. "Origins is not fixed, it is a fluid installation in a constant state of flux," as the press release states.

The drawings are suspended by monofilament - one page has vertical lines, one is on graph paper. The sheets are situated one in front of the other but all are visible. There is a lot of negative space in these drawings. The compositions are subtle and mysterious: gathered in a clump like a bird's nest or huddled in the lower right corner of an otherwise blank page.



*Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian, Origins, Installation view (Photo by Mark Bloch)*

One of the drawings reminded me of French fries or hashtags gone bad. Another is something like Matta's versions of the Duchamp-influenced "explosions in a shingle factory." Another seems to be comprised of 3-D drawings rising off the page like a severe watermark, their edges seeming to lift, white on white, catching light, glistening. Here lines look grey, there charcoal and a batch of chunky forms have black outlines. Another one, a smaller drawing of smaller shapes, looks like noodles or tiny worms. Closer inspection reveals that the edges of some are actually raised brushstrokes in white paint.

When I trudge out of the installation I learn more from a checklist: "*Flaps*, 1998. graphite and gel medium on gridded mylar, 24 x 18." "*Merge*, acrylic, gel medium and watercolor on paper, 2001." Two called *Lingering* from 2002-2004 and 2003-2004 respectively. "Acrylic and watercolor on paper mounted on wood."



*Sharon Louden and Hrag Vartanian, Origins, Installation view (Photo by Mark Bloch)*

In all there are six drawings, executed by Louden and selected by Vartanian. Hrag Vartanian is the NY-based editor-in-chief and co-founder of the arts blogzine *Hyperallergic*, whose brand is to always bring a fresh perspective to stories about art. He has curated numerous exhibitions since the late 1990s.

Sharon Louden's paintings, drawings, animations, sculpture and installations focus on lines and linear abstractions and their implied or actual movement, creating anthropomorphic suggestions with simple lines and gestures. She is an educator and a creator of communities and residencies and the author of two books with the phrase "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life," in the title. They focus on the resourcefulness required to navigate the art industry.

*Signs and Symbols* serves as a curatorial platform and multi-disciplinary incubator bringing together diverse mediums to stimulate dialogue and creative connections. The contemporary art space is grounded in performance. It is curated, programmed and directed by Mitra Khorasheh, an independent curator and educator while her co-founder Elise Herget comes from an extensive developmental and non-profit background. **WM**



#### MARK BLOCH

Mark Bloch is a writer, performer, videographer and multi-media artist living in Manhattan. In 1978, this native Ohioan founded the Post(al) Art Network a.k.a. PAN. NYU's Downtown Collection now houses an archive of many of Bloch's papers including a vast collection of mail art and related ephemera. For three decades Bloch has done performance art in the USA and internationally. In addition to his work as a writer and fine artist, he has also worked as a graphic designer for ABCNews.com, The New York Times, Rolling Stone and elsewhere. He can be reached at [bloch.mark@gmail.com](mailto:bloch.mark@gmail.com) and PO Box 1500 NYC 10009.

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