The Sounds Among Us

Caroline Kent

April 27–October 30, 2022

Essay by Camile Bacon

Gracing the Art Wall that lines BAM’s vast Crane Forum is Chicago-based painter Caroline Kent’s The Sounds Among Us (2022). This project brings into being Kent’s first mural of this scale in an institutional context and builds upon her fascination with the limits and poetics of translation. The compositional logic for The Sounds Among Us draws from the process of writing poetry, and the work accumulates as a series of layers. However, Kent breaks away from the rigid structure suggested by traditional sheet music to align with an ethos akin to the Black jazz tradition, which honors the breaking of convention in order to realize an unbridled and ecstatic affective terrain.

Each painted stratum of The Sounds Among Us is composed of the artist’s unique abstract language of shapes, which bear recognizable geometries that skirt the margins of legibility. Consistency of form and combination of angles but are fused with something peculiar, in turn forming a rhythmic sprinkling of shapes rendered in bright colors, which register as musical notations for everyday sounds. The “undertones” (what I later call “overtones”) are made up of two registers of that which is caught up in the throes of blackness.1

By refusing to limit herself to a single tone of black and instead exploring the poetics of Black abstraction, Kent activates the shadow layer not only as a latent space that draws things into its opaque core, shuffles and unreels them around, and ejects them anew. For the artist, the distinction between “ground” and “space” is an essential one: ground is used as a support or backdrop, whereas space is an entity that is active, that interacts with shapes, that has a specific frequency. This transformation from ground to space is enabled by Kent’s capacity to distill the affective statements that simultaneously anchor the eye and muddle the mind, instructing where to budge in order to allow the other to rise up. The friction between them gives way to a sense that the layers have learned to breathe together each granting the next the space needed to unfurl. They have an encrypted intelligence, knowing precisely when and where to judge in order to allow the other to rise up.

The final layer of The Sounds Among Us is composed of three poetic statements that simultaneously anchor the eye and muddle the mind, ushering us again into an interpretive realm that hinges not only on intellect (as in the case of traditional art historical inquiry), but also on an acute awareness of how the mural alters our somatic experience of the space (as advocated for by the tenets of Black feminist thought).2

The following are the compositional logits that provide additional interpretive information:

1. I imagine the potential energy generated by the collective churning of voices or the ambience of a group engaged in hushed muttering is rendered in shapes that are the products of “people’s present condition,” both in line with contemporary scholarship on shape-shifting, movement, embodiment, and the generative possibilities ofBlack feminist thought.2


ARTIST BIO

Kent was Born in Detroit, Illinois, Kent received her B.A. from Illinois State University (1998) and MFA from Howard University School of Fine Arts (2007). Her recent one-person exhibitions have included Victoria/Yessica: Making Room (RCA-Chicago) and Caroline Kent: What the Stars Can Talk (Go! Galerie). Her work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Black Art Museum, Walker Art Center, and the Barack and Michelle Obama private collection, among others. Kent teaches at Northwestern University (Chicago) in the Art, Theory, and Practice Department. WHITE/BIPOC

Caroline Kent is a Chicago-based writer and Black feminist whose practice is invested in exploring the poetics of black abstraction.

REFERENCES

Caroline Kent: What the Stars Can Talk (2022), acrylic paint on wall. May you sink down and emerge indelibly, fundamentally, and triumphantly changed.


2. See Frances Hellman and Warren Breslau. The Sounds Among Us, Caroline Kent: Tell Us, Tell Us: Exploring the Poetics of Black Abstraction (MCA Chicago) and Victoria/Veronica: Making Room (RCA-Chicago).

ART WALL

Caroline Kent is organized by BAM/PFA staff and curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, director, with the assistance of Christina Heng, chief curator. The Art Wall is commissioned by BAM/PFA and made possible with major funding from Frances Hesselton and Warren Breslau.
