

## BROOKLYN RAIL

### Julia Rommel: *Candy Jail*

Rommel is and has always been a colorist.



Julia Rommel, *41 First Dates* (detail), 2019

Light purple, the sort of purple that is a touch too confectionary to be called lavender or lilac or violet, the chalk-ish pastel kind that is more often found in the manes of unicorns and the most delicate sunrises, is a color I don't often encounter as the centerpiece of serious art. Except, maybe, for the iridescent block of the shade in Mark Rothko's *No. 6* (1951), light purple is a background, a lowlight, a flourish. Take the monochromatic incantation in Josef Albers's *Proto-Form* (B) (1938), or the soothing variation in Henri Matisse's *The Moroccans* (1915 – 16) as examples. And then there is Julia Rommel's *Great White Shark* (2019) on view now at Bureau as part of *Candy Jail*, Rommel's fourth solo show at the gallery.

The canvas, like nearly all the others in the show, is about seven-and-a-half feet tall. At the opening on a recent Sunday night, a small horde of people moved through the space parabolically: they got close to *Great White Shark* and then walked away with the purpose of coming back to it again. This is not to say that Rommel's other works are missable: they're not. They're excellent, each emboldens Rommel's command of color, and each has its own narrative and formal idiosyncrasies. Only *Great White Shark* has the gravitational pull of a masterpiece. It is the center of *Candy Jail*'s universe, the reason people show up. It's important for great artists to have the experience of making works that stand out from their others.

Rommel is and has always been a colorist. Some of her early paintings were entirely Reinhardt-esque black, and others were other kinds of monochrome. As her project has evolved, however, her works have come to be as defined by movement as they are by hue. *Great White Shark* is the nonpareil meeting of these elements. A periwinkle square is the central feature of the painting, and is sandwiched between two slimmer rectangles, one cream, the other a sky blue that manages, still, to look purple. Process emblemizes Rommel's work. To make a painting, she wraps stretcher boards with excessive canvas, which she fixes to the back like overflowing bedding; as she goes, she turns her attention to the extra, releasing it and rebinding it on new differently sized boards, color-correcting or leaving the stains of stray brushstrokes. Sometimes she gessoes. Sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes she sands. This sounds messy, but the effect is extremely deliberate. "They're all very laborious. Slow slow paintings," says gallery-owner Gabrielle Giattino.

My favorite part of *Great White Shark* is its edges, which are also purple, but lashed periodically with earthly greens and the same cream used on the painting's face. Standing beside the painting, face nearly pressed to the gallery wall, is like looking at another work altogether, one defined by a looser expressionism as opposed to the geometrics of the frontal view. Similar moments arise in the other paintings included in the show. I was struck for instance by the dimensionality of *Volvo 240* (2019), in which a depression resulting from a former stretching is painted an electric Kelly green and bisects a tangerine rectangle. On the upper right edge of the same work, Rommel introduces a stroke of magenta that functions, somehow, to animate everything else.



Julia Rommel, *Great White Shark*, 2019



Julia Rommel, *Volvo 240*, 2019

“They’re beautiful but you can tell that she’s also wrestling with them,” Giattino says as we tour the eccentricities of Rommel’s work. “There is this element of struggle and correcting. They’re just so large and so complicated.”

In *41 First Dates*, planes of various pinks and vertical off-white columns playfully interrupt one another’s space, and teeter on a rectangle the color of the sea. At the top of the painting, however, is a unique feature: a series of thick brushstrokes, forest green, slanted, like rushes or waves. They are, I imagine, indicative of the kind of struggle Giattino means. There is a sense of desperation or frustration in their application, like a painterly Hail Mary, which makes sense given the title of the work. The strokes are a moment, a fuck-it, a “why not wear this neckerchief with my ballgown,” and manage to infuse the art with humor, which is a welcome touch when the work is so decidedly brilliant that there is little the artist can do to screw it up.

“The studio has been difficult this year: I tried to be more decisive, but each painting quickly strayed from its initial plan, and ended up needing so many revisions,” Rommel wrote for *Candy Jail’s* press release.

But no one is decisive when she is as engaged with process as Rommel is. Why should she be? Every movement, every addition, every erasure is recorded by the work and so vacillation and error live happily, arrestingly, within it.