

# whitewall

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# KRISTIN BAKER: THE PAINTER

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON SCHMIDT

Kristin Baker's materials of choice — PVC, acrylic, squeegees, tape, and scrapers — more closely resemble items on a shopping list for a home improvement project than essentials for an artist's studio. Never a fan of the brush, Baker began using squeegees and tape to apply paint while in grad school at Yale, creating layers and fractures that evoke light, movement, and dimensionality. She garnered early acclaim for her abstract paintings of auto racing but has since moved away from making her personal passion a focus in her work. Four new works are currently on view through March 27, 2011, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in its I. M. Pei-designed Linde Family Wing. *Whitewall* spoke with the artist earlier this winter about her process, her unique choice of medium, and new works that explore transparency, transition, and natural and artificial light.

**WHITEWALL:** Your first solo museum show is currently up at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. You received your BFA from the School of the MFA and Tufts. Is it of particular importance for you to have your work now on view at the MFA?

**KRISTIN BAKER:** Technically, it's my second solo museum show. It is, however, my first at a U.S. museum. It is nice to have a full-circle experience. It's an honor to be at the MFA, and it's been positive to revisit the place where my artmaking really began. The series of memories that have come to surface have definitely informed my process while working on the show.

**WW:** The four paintings at the MFA are done on either PVC or acrylic sheets. Why paint on these materials?

**KB:** Essentially, everything is plastic: the paint and the panels. I like thinking of the painting as one unified material taking on multifaceted forms. Acrylic or plastic is still sort of new in terms of the progression of art history. I'm more interested in exploring something that's relatively new; it just makes more sense.

**WW:** When did you first start working with more glossy materials and tools like squeegees?

**KB:** I started only using squeegees in the middle of grad school at Yale in 2001. I was using glossy materials all along. The squeegee came in when I switched from sign paint to acrylic. I wanted to retain a smooth surface, and I was never in love with the brush. The squeegee applies the paint to the panel more directly, keeping a lot of the integrity of the paint as material. There is something more sculptural about this process.

**WW:** How did the location of the exhibition, in the I. M. Pei-designed wing, affect the works?

**KB:** For most of my exhibitions I react to the space either directly or indirectly. Often, the scale is determined by the space. In this case, the varying levels of artificial and natural light are elements of the gallery that I used in how I was thinking about each work.

Clockwise from top:

**Kristin Baker**

*Full Down Parallax*

2010

Acrylic on acrylic with powder-coated  
aluminum frame

114 x 99 x 15 inches

Photograph by *Matthiu Placek*

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the  
artist, and Suzanne Geiss Co., New York

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From left to right:

**Kristin Baker**

*Full Down Parallax*

2010

Acrylic on acrylic with powder-coated  
aluminum frame

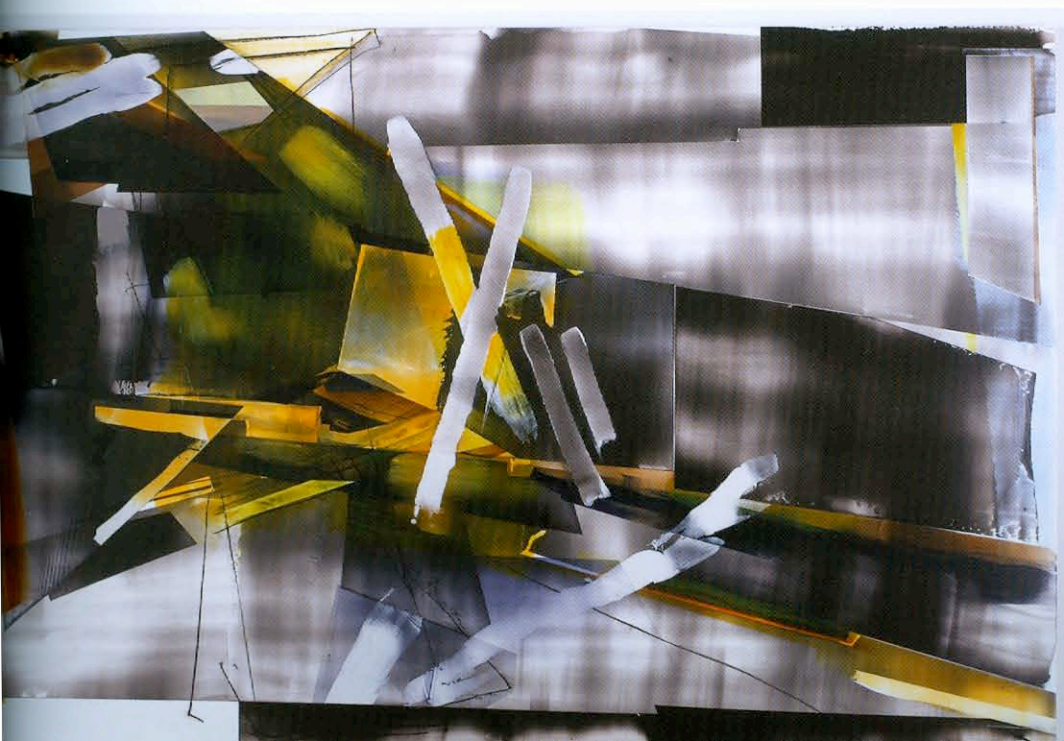
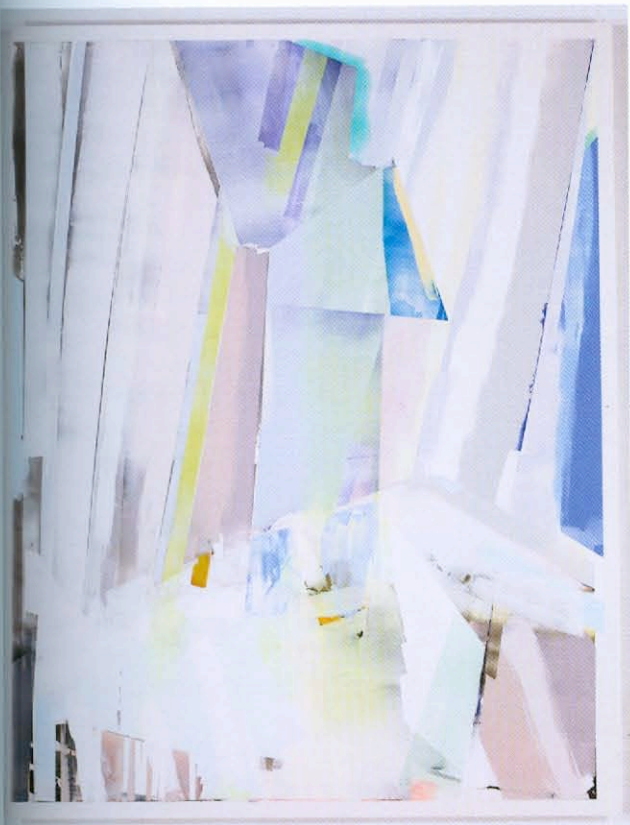
**Kristin Baker**

*Within Refraction*

2010

Acrylic and charcoal on PVC

Courtesy of the artist and Suzanne Geiss Co., New  
York. © Kristin Baker. From "Kristin Baker: New  
Paintings Exhibition" Community Arts and SMFA  
Gallery E, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
September 30, 2010. Photograph © Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston



**Kristin Baker**

*Within Refraction*

2010

Acrylic and charcoal on PVC

79 x 119 x 1 inches

Photograph by *Matthiu Placek*

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
the artist, and Suzanne Geiss Co., New York

© Kristin Baker

**Kristin Baker**

*Rime Affinity*

2010

Acrylic on PVC

100 x 79 x 1 inches

Photograph by *Matthiu Placek*

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,  
the artist, and Suzanne Geiss Co., New York

© Kristin Baker



*"I'VE ALWAYS PREFERRED LARGE-SCALE PAINTINGS. I DON'T THINK IT NEEDS TO BE LARGE TO CONVEY MOVEMENT... BUT IT DOES HELP TO TRANSLATE THE MOVEMENT INHERENT IN THE PHYSICAL PROCESS AND THE MAKING"*

**KB:** They are very much about process, but in the end they are very moody spaces beyond their making.

**WW:** *You're well known from your paintings of racetracks and crashes — is this a subject you're moving away from?*

**KB:** I've been moving away from auto racing for some time now. It has always been about painting itself for me, and the seductive subject matter of racing became the focus of how the work was being read and negated all other information included. I now keep my love and work separate. That being said, the culture and speed of racing still influence the work at times.

**WW:** *Walk us through a day in your studio.*

**KB:** I prefer to paint during the day while the sun is still out, because the natural light is essential to my work. The natural light sets a positive tone in the studio; it enhances the sacredness, and, most importantly, I can see the colors best in this light. So I get to the studio as early as possible, especially in the winter.

I spend the first one to three hours looking at the works in process. During this time I draw on photographs taken the previous day of the works. I then start the taping and painting. This goes on till the studio darkens.

**WW:** *How do you begin a painting?*

**KB:** After I've made a list of ideas, done several different simple sketches, plus gathered a handful of random photos compiling many versions of a potential painting. I then cross everything out, discard it all, and start to paint, usually with one broad stroke or form. The colors usually lead the way at first.

**WW:** *What role does color play in your work? Are you using it to convey a subject, mood, or light?*

**KB:** All of the above and none of the above.

**WW:** *Each work has so many layers. How do you know when a work is complete?*

**KB:** Its not a matter of how I know. It's more, "Aha" — like arriving somewhere new.

Another characteristic of the space that played out in the paintings is how this gallery connects one wing of the museum to another. This is a key feature of this particular space — it's a central link, with many people passing through. It's not a space that concludes a viewing experience, but, rather, links it all together.

This notion influenced the movement in the paintings and their relationship to each other. The paintings subtly connect to each other even while on different walls, with edges of color that lead to the colors of the next work. This particular series was like chapters in one book. Each painting is one chapter leading to the next.

**WW:** *Full Dawn Parallax is on acrylic and set a foot or so from the wall — so its colors are reflected on the wall behind and on the marble floor. Did you place this work underneath the skylight for that reason?*



**KB:** Yes — this one was the most specific to the space in that way. It's all about absorbing and reflecting the real light and is purposely placed on the wall that can be seen from the most vantage points in the gallery and around the gallery.

**WW:** *The four works are quite large — do you prefer to work on that scale? Is a larger canvas more adept at conveying movement?*

**KB:** I've always preferred large-scale paintings. I don't think it needs to be large to convey movement — that can be done at any scale — but it does help to translate the movement inherent in the physical process and the making. This is something I'm very interested in, and I feel this direct relationship to my physical movement is actually very intimate.

**WW:** *These works seem to explore light and perspective more so than past works. Are light and perspective something you've become more interested in lately?*

**KB:** I've always been interested in perspective and light. I just focused the interest more acutely in the MFA show with no other distractions.

**WW:** *These four paintings seem to be more about process than subject. Is that true? Or is there a theme or subject you were focusing on?*

Kristin Baker

*Matter Facture*

2010

Acrylic on PVC

79 x 100 x 1 inches

Photograph by Mattheo Plicek

Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,

the artist, and Suzanna Geiss Co., New York

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