

Rebecca Bengal on Karen Brummund's Time-Based Drawings



Karen Brummund
Storm Road, Groton, NY, before installation

It's like a riff on Gertrude Stein—a barn is not a barn but is covered by a drawing of a barn. But what does it mean to portray a barn or a field, as did Thomas Cole and other painters of the Hudson River School, who sought beauty in the ordinary, catching the light as it struck its wood. What does a man's barn mean to him, asks the Faulkner short story "Barn Burning" and Paul Newman's reckless, angry young barn-burner in *The Long, Hot Summer*. What is earned by covering up a barn, asked the farmers who agreed (for a very small fee) in the 1890s to allow advertisers to paint the sides of their barns with oversize ads for loose-leaf tobacco—*Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco: Treat Yourself To The Best*. With her time-based drawings of barns and other public buildings, artist Karen Brummund essentially considers all of these questions.

As with all four thus-completed installations in her time-based series, Brummund's premise is simple to the point of elegance, satisfying the dual impulses to create and to destroy. Find a public space—a barn, say, in the case of *Storm Road*, her installation last June on a restored barn in Groton, NY. Draw the building, and enlarge it digitally to the scale of the actual structure. Split the resized drawing into equal increments, 8½" x 11" apiece. Print out each one on white 20-lb. letter paper (generally, for the scale that Brummund works in, this takes 1,000-1,500 sheets). Round up volunteers (a rotating cast of friends and neighbors) and head to said building. Operate like a construction crew: "My husband likes to climb on the ladders." All together, attach each page to its corresponding place on the facade, over the walls, like shingles, but also over the windows and the roof. Work quickly, sometimes against the setting sun. Step back. Set up camp. And wait. And watch. And eventually, let it all fall off.

Over the past two years, Brummund has made time-based drawings of four buildings—two rural, one urban, one somewhere in between. To the artist, both the installation and the video of the papers' application and falling off are the time-based drawing, and the public space is the canvas or the page. Time-lapse camerawork condenses the whole transformation. "It allows me to see it consistently over a period of time," Brummund says. It also allows those who weren't there to experience the drawing.

Her video of *Storm Road* is the most stunning of her series to date. An ordinary wood barn, *Storm Road* is situated in a green field on what turned out to be a very appropriately named road. Even as the crew hustles to put up the first rows of the installation, a cooler spectrum is apparent in the sky. Almost as soon as all of the paper is in place, stormy dusk intrudes. Green lights flash over the surface, and white, globelike objects—hailstones—show up in the frame. Pops of orange and yellow punctuate the gray sky-like light scattered as if from a fireworks show, alternating with green and violet strobes. The vast amount of whiteness on the barn reflects the colors and shadows, seeming more like a projection screen than a canvas. And then the night goes dark.



Karen Brummund
Storm Road, during its June 14, 2008 installation
Drawing, photograph, and paper

Storm Road, Brummund says, stayed up about four days, which is roughly the lifespan of most of her installations. In the video, dawn reveals the barn in stark white, a survivor of the previous night, but as the day begins to warm, the pages quickly curl up and float off the facade, piece by piece. For the artist, who camps out beside her work when she can, the moments that video viewers see sped-up papers sliding off, clouds rolling overhead, are the most quiet and reflective.

"So much work goes into making it and putting it up, so much community and dialogue, and then we work in one full swoop, about a six-hour day. So when it's all done and I'm alone with the piece, I just get to look. It's a very contemplative atmosphere. I'm in a sense partnering with natural elements and I'm always surprised by things—whether it's which way people walk past the piece, whether they choose to stop, what they look at, how the wind moves. There's a real beauty and a sense of loss of control."



Karen Brummund
9 Groton Avenue, as evening settles (July, 2008)
Drawing, photograph, and paper

Brummund's most recent time-based drawing occurred late this summer on the *9 Groton Avenue* site, a house near Ithaca that had been the local train conductor's home. The family next door eventually became involved in the process themselves, assisting Brummund in papering the structure. Their young daughter stopped by daily to inspect the work. "I get it," the girl said sagely. "You cover it up and then it falls off and then you can see it again."

Rebecca Bengal's story "*Captioning for the Blind*" was recently published in an illustrated edition by Monofonus Press. Her profile

of photographer William Eggleston will be appearing in the November 10 issue of New York magazine. More of her work can be seen on her website, www.tvmodern.net.

For more on information on Karen Brummund, go to www.karenbrummund.com.

20 Jay Street, 7th Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201 T (212) 366 6900 F (212) 366 1778

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