

VARIABLE WEST

Capturing a slow sublime: Sun You at Ditch Projects

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Installation image of *Melodramatic Soul Crushing Saturday Morning* at Ditch Projects. Image courtesy of Ditch Projects.

On the eve of a winter storm that ravaged most of Oregon, Ditch Projects, located in Springfield, OR, quietly opened a waggish and bright solo exhibition by New York-based artist, curator, and educator Sun You.

Melodramatic Soul Crushing Saturday Morning comprises 59 small, flat maquettes, sculpted of colorful polymer clay and finished in clear resin. For this presentation, and for the first time since their realization, these works hang upright on gallery walls as opposed to lying prone on a level plan. At Ditch, they span the entirety of the space's expansive 2000 sq ft and present as an uninterrupted strand.

You affectionately refers to these works as "sculpeys," a cheeky homage to the brand name oven-bake clay Sculpey that functions as her primary medium. She describes her process as intuitive and spontaneous. The forms take shape as a collection of gestures informed by her earlier paintings and installations, with large swaths of off white clay serving as the artist's "canvas" and the interjections of vivid pinks, blues, and greens acting as foregrounded. There is a harmonious balance of contrasting forms in these pieces. In a single work, such as "Untitled," sharper lines created by chunks of clay form rigid, bitten edges that sweep languidly into organic swirls of rolled clay.



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Each of the sculptures at Ditch Projects were hand-built in the comfort of You's home kitchen using everyday objects like a rolling pin and cookie tray as tools. She combines the clay haphazardly as inspiration arises, flattening it to her specific dimensions before quartering the work with a bread knife—this serves as the only "destructive" action in an otherwise intentionally additive formula. She then rearranges the sections while continuing to manipulate and tease the clay to a desired outcome. The effect of quilting together uncorrespondent parts gives rise to a consistent angular cross section that appears, in varying degrees, in each of the sculptures. Works such as "Untitled" highlight this composite tension more overtly, whereas a piece like "Untitled" completely blurs expectations. However prominent, I understand this repetition as a subtle nod to a careful methodology underlying an otherwise impulsive, rigorous melding anxious to incite novelty.

This tactile practice is akin to a performance in its capacity to invite chaos and chance into the fold. You names artists like Joanne Greenbaum and Isa Genzken as inspirations in this effort. It's not a far stretch to see even earlier nods to avant-garde abstraction and geometric assemblage in her realized effects. In an interview I conducted with You via Zoom on January 23rd, 2023, she shared that she makes the sculptures without judging them: "When I make them I don't think about what's good and what isn't. Editing comes later in the gallery."



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Since 2008, Ditch Projects has operated as an artist-founded and run studio, exhibition, and performance space committed to fostering critical contemporary art experiences. They are drawn to creatives working within experimental fields who share interest in exploring and shaping new boundaries of creative discourse. Sun You initially connected with Ditch as a visiting professor at University of Oregon in Eugene. She envisioned *Melodramatic Soul Crushing Saturday Morning* between coasts, delving deeper into her personal rules of craft while stressing the site to specifically guide visual possibilities.

Certain factors were non-negotiables; size, execution, materials. The choice of the more accessible and affordable Sculpey clay as her exclusive medium granted You flexible territory to lower the stakes, make errors, and dream wildly without fear of waste. She told me that she often enjoys working within set limitations and assisted systems to uncover hidden potential. Color, for example, remains limited to a palette of twelve options. She is disinterested in fabricating new hues but will allow the occasional marbling by conjoining two or more tints in a spiral formation and letting imagination run wild.

The finished sculptures thus emerge uniform in scale and process, as well as title—each work is untitled save for a corresponding image in the gallery catalog to delineate its location within the space. The exhibition title is the only fickle attempt at using language to typify the artist's oeuvre. *Melodramatic Soul Crushing Saturday Morning* is borrowed from You's "daylist," a popular Spotify feature that promises to deliver your day in a concise, rotating playlist. While the words present a poetic entrance into the work, You is toying with her audience. The ready-made title demonstrates another facet of her casual approach to craft, one rooted in comedy and lightheartedness. It is an inside joke in the same manner that one playlist, much less one exhibition, can claim to wholly capture an individual's entire essence. As such, *Melodramatic Soul Crushing Saturday Morning* is a mere moment along a joyous evolution. The works on display capture a slow sublime and offer eager gallery goers a taste of the inner workings of an artist beholden to her process and materials.