



Tauba Auerbach

The artist and polymath delves into the looking glass for her first major UK solo show

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Tauba Auerbach is an autodidact. The 32-year-old may have been out of school for a few years, but she is a voracious learner, someone for whom mathematics is a recreational pleasure rather than an unsavoury pedagogical memory.

"It's funny because I still feel like a kid so often," reflects the artist, whose inventive, colour-drenched works in a variety of media often merge aesthetics with topology, the mathematical study of shapes and spaces. "I'll find myself surrounded by high school students on the train or something and have a moment where I realise, oh, wait, we're not the same age."

Auerbach could be forgiven for losing track of time; her ascent since graduating in 2003 from Stanford, in California where she grew up, has been multi-stranded and impressive. Following a stint as a commercial sign painter in the precarious post-graduation haze, Auerbach made a name for herself with intriguing works engaged with typographic and op-art motifs that soon made their way into surveys of young, hotly-tipped artists in the late 2000s. Auerbach has since been busy: relocating to New York, setting up her own print press, creating new mathematical symbols with academic Byron Cook and researching

unusual colour perception (tetrachromacy) at the Smithsonian, and that's just scratching the surface. Among her many works are gorgeous "shatter" paintings, created by smashing a sheet of glass on a canvas, removing each shard and spray-painting the space left behind, and the Auerglass, a tandem organ designed with her best friend, the musician Cameron Mesirov, aka Glasser.

This spring, she presents her first major solo show in the UK, at London's ICA, inspired by Martin Gardner's popular science book *The Ambidextrous Universe*, which explores symmetry and asymmetry in nature and in art. Just as Gardner deconstructs popular notions of how mirrors work in the book (in fact flipping an image from front to back rather than side to side), Auerbach examines reflection in her own, atypical way with floor-based works comprised of sheets of wood cut into jagged strips and laid out in reverse order. It's a sort of "low res" version of the physical object from inside the mirror world", she says.

Auerbach's interest in the empirical world stretches almost as far back as her initial desire to become an artist and the two were never really distinct. "For me, a lot of that 'left-brained' thinking, the sort of technical and stridently



logical way of thinking - it's often through those pathways that I feel the most moved and expressive," she explains. "They're not two conflicting ways of approaching information or thinking, they're really married to each other."

Her spell making sign paintings after university, which she took for the practical, hands-on nature of the job, left an indelible impression on her and the way she physically approaches her work. "When you're painting that way, you have to find this sweet spot in your speed," she explains. "If you move too quickly, you'll move off the line, but if you move too slowly it doesn't look graceful. You have to find a balance, and after a while you're breathing a bit differently to support that balance. I think that practice of calibrating a sweet spot between control and fluidity is something that's been useful to me in many ways."

It was in this period that she and Mesirov, whom she has known since they were teenagers, first had the idea to make a musical instrument, sneaking into the sign shop one night to make a banjo. Six years later, they made the Auerglass, another experience that collapsed so-called left and right side thinking to harmonious effect, each bringing their respective engineering and musical skills to

the table. The giant wooden organ, which loomed almost like an ark in the infamous Deitch Projects in New York, required them to sit at opposite ends of the structure; only when one hit a pedal could the other play a series of notes. Indeed, it could be a metaphor for the way their work frequently interweaves.

"Cameron and I spend a lot of time together; whatever she's thinking about most will naturally be on my mind," she says. "She's been thinking about architecture and interiority and exteriority, and I've noticed that these things have come into my work more and more. The weavings that I've been doing recently have architectural motifs cropping up and I totally attribute that to Cameron and to her newest album, which I've been playing a lot in the studio."

Now resident in New York, Auerbach looks back on her years in California fondly. "I was basically in San Francisco until I was 27. It was a good place to grow up and it's a gentler city than, say, New York," she muses. "But overall I like the pressure here. I found San Francisco to be a kind of complacent environment when I left. I can't feel happy in that."

Words Laura Allsop
Portrait Joss McKinley

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