

optic nerve

Math, science, and fashion all play a role in the innovations of abstract artist Tauba Auerbach.

the entire point of making art, to me, is newness," says Tauba Auerbach, "and to expand your mind, even in some tiny way." A 27-year-old San Francisco native who recently moved to downtown Manhattan, Auerbach has been attracting notice with her fresh and surprising reinventions of abstraction, in which conceptual puzzles play new tricks on the mind's eye.

Her *50/50 Floor*, with 100,000 black-and-white tiles laid down in random order, wowed viewers at last summer's "Constraction" show at Deitch Projects, which represents her in New York. At the moment, she's working with holograms, cast-resin sculptures, paintings based on crumpled paper, and the problem of "collapsing order and chaos into a unified state."

The only child of theater designers who have created the mechanical stages for several Cirque du Soleil productions, Auerbach knew she wanted to be an artist "from the second I thought about it," she tells me. Instead of going to art school, though, she studied fine arts at Stanford and took a lot of math and science courses. "I thought it was better for me to know about a lot of things, not just to focus on art." For three years she worked as a sign painter. "Being around letters every day started an aesthetic fascination with words and springboarded me into what I've been doing ever since," she says. Her first significant works were large (50 by 38 inches), intricately calligraphic drawings, black India ink on paper, of letters of the alphabet, in which each letter hovers on the edge of decipherability. "To think that 26 little things are the building blocks for so much," she says, "that you can reduce all of literature down to so few components. And to take that a step further with digital language, reducing everything down to two components—that blows my mind."

Auerbach will be showing new work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in February, and she's been selected for the New Museum's triennial, "Generational: Younger than Jesus," in New York in April. Her range of activity seems boundless. In addition to her paintings and sculptures, she's working with the Cambridge University logician Byron Cook, designing new mathematical symbols for his research on what's known as "the halting problem" in computability theory. She's also collaborating with Comme des Garçons on a line of T-shirts that makes use of her near-abstract alphabets. "I like fashion for the same reasons I like art and music," says Auerbach. She sat in the front row at Marc Jacobs's fashion show last fall, and she spends a lot of time looking at Style.com with her boyfriend and fellow artist Keegan McHargue. (They've both had exact replicas of each other's freckles tattooed on their hands.) "I just bought a ridiculous gray Fendi coat," she says. "It's half cape and half coat, and it makes me look like a ladybug, or maybe a big circle.

"I strive to look unplaceable, and maybe that's something I could say about my work, too." —DODIE KAZANJIAN

ENIGMA VARIATIONS

The artist, in her Brooklyn studio, with *Static 4* (2008), to her right, *Crumple I* (2008), behind, and a work in progress on the floor. Marni top, Alexander Wang T-shirt, and Fendi skirt. Necklace, her own design. Vintage Hermès watch and YSL ring. Banli Zambrelli sandals. Details, see In This Issue.

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