

ART WALL

Caroline Kent

April 27–September 25, 2022

Essay by Camille Bacon

Gracing the Art Wall that lines BAMPFA's vaulting Crane Forum is Chicago-based painter Caroline Kent's *The Sounds Among Us* (2022). This project brings into being Kent's first mural of this scale in an institutional context and builds upon her fascination with the limits and poetics of translation. The compositional logic for *The Sounds Among Us* draws from the process of writing sheet music, which, like the mural itself, accumulates as a series of layers. However, Kent breaks away from the rigid structure suggested by traditional sheet music to align with an ethos akin to the Black jazz tradition, which honors the breaking of convention in order to realize an unbridled and ecstatic affective terrain.

Each painted stratum of *The Sounds Among Us* is composed of the artist's unique abstract language of shapes, which bear recognizable angles but are fused with something peculiar, in turn forming geometries that skirt the margins of legibility. Consistency of form paired with the explosion of scale and the insertion of text into the composition draws *The Sounds Among Us* into intimate connection with the archetypal elements of Kent's practice, while also representing a moment of audacious experimentation for the artist.

The painted elements of *The Sounds Among Us* are made up of two unique layers, which according to the artist figure "a kind of musical notation for everyday sounds." The "undertones" (what I later call the "shadow" layer) can be thought of as "quieted voices, shuffling of bodies, footsteps on the stairs, hushed muted tones, and/or whispers." For the artist, the "overtones" resonate as more distinguishable sounds such as "talking, laughter, clapping, stomping, breaks, and pauses in speech." Ultimately, the sounds signified by each layer populate the Crane Forum, inviting spectators to both look *and* listen closely, and consider what it might mean to integrate the sonic dimensions of this art-viewing experience into our interpretive frame.

Kent often paints atop a uniform black canvas. While staying true to this devotional move, here the artist celebrates her range by extending and complicating it. The shadow layer, which grounds *The Sounds Among Us*, is made up of a dense conglomeration of shapes rendered in varying tones of black, all of which subtly dance in, among, out, and through one another. If not for their proximity, each shape in the shadow layer would meld seamlessly into the next, making them indistinguishable. It is the intimacy between forms that allows them to be apprehended as individual units, while still being inextricably connected to and influenced by the associated shapes that envelop them on all sides.

Additionally, the slight differences in hue within the shadow layer are only discernible when one is willing to shift one's body toward the mural (likely much closer than we are usually inclined to be when beholding a work of art, especially in a museum where we are taught not to touch), until one is close enough to hear its breath. There is a sense, then, that the intimacy between the shapes also pulls us as spectators into a certain intimacy with the work and may even encourage a similar dance between spectators who find themselves beholding *The Sounds Among Us* at the same time.

By refusing to limit herself to a single tone of black and instead engaging a multitude, Kent activates the shadow layer not only as a ground upon which the subsequent layers of *The Sounds Among Us* rest, but as a latent space that draws things into its opaque core, shuffles them around, and ejects them anew. For the artist, the distinction between "ground" and "space" is an essential one: ground is used as a support or background, whereas space is an entity that is active, that interacts, that shapes, that has a specific frequency. This transformation from ground to space is enabled by Kent's capacity to distill the affective registers of that which is caught up in the throes of blackness.¹

Painted atop the shadow layer is what Kent names the "overtones": a rhythmic sprinkling of shapes rendered in bright colors, which both spring from and swim in the darker forms beneath, lending the composition as a whole a certain dynamism. The overlaying of colorful

forms guides the spectator's eye across the mural in a zigzag fashion, opening out onto the unsettling yet generative feeling of not knowing where to rest our gaze, and therefore again calling us to depend on our other senses (primarily hearing) to engage the mural in its full expanse.

After a prolonged look and listen, it is as if the shadow layer has been fractured, allowing the overtones to rise up like blisters from its depths. Here, the shadow layer and the overtones act almost like tectonic plates. The friction between them gives way to a sense that the layers have learned to breathe together, each granting the next the space needed to unfurl. They have an encrypted intelligence, knowing precisely when and where to budge in order to allow the other to rise up.

The final layer of *The Sounds Among Us* is composed of three poetic statements that simultaneously anchor the eye and muddle the mind, ushering us again into an interpretive realm that hinges not only on intellect (as in the case of traditional art historical inquiry), but also on an acute awareness of how the mural alters our somatic experience of the space (as advocated for by the tenets of Black feminist thought).² The statements take the form of closed captions that provide additional interpretive information, therefore also denoting an absence of that which we may need to fully apprehend the mural. The encrypted nature of poetic language, however, does not satisfy the desire to *know* more, and instead beckons toward the possibility of *feeling* more.

All in all, the porous nature of each layer (and the attendant interaction between them) brings to mind the quality of blackness that binds even as it shifts and rumbles: a bone-known understanding that the most serene depths of aliveness are reached only through an embrace of a malleable, inarticulable, yet palpable codependence. Each layer needs the next in order to hold. And yet, we as spectators are not privy to the details of such holding. Together, then, there is a sense that the shadow layer, overtones, and poetic phrases are colluding, as if the shadow layer is passing the phrases from shape to shape in the overtones. There is a distinct feeling that these layers are up to something. Ultimately, the mural is withholding in its mischief and harmonious in its intent. As Kent states unabashedly, "I am not

revealing all my cards," and neither is *The Sounds Among Us*, which gloriously demands a certain devotional engagement from us as spectators.

May each of you who find yourselves beholding The Sounds Among Us embrace your range and breathe into your totality acknowledge the agency derived from embracing your inherent illegibility,³ and inquire after the blackness, after your own depths and valleys. May you sink down and emerge indelibly, fundamentally, and triumphantly changed.

1. Imagine the potential energy generated by the cyclical churning of waves or the endless trembling of the earth beneath us (as theorized by Edouard Glissant's notion of "la pensée du tremblement"); both are sites to consider subtle shape shifting, unpredictability, movement, alchemy, and the fundamental nature of change, all of which are embedded in and spring out of blackness.
2. See Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Tucson: Kore Press, 2000).
3. See Edouard Glissant, "For Opacity," in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London, New York: Verso, 2020).

ARTIST BIO

Born in Sterling, Illinois, Kent received her BS from Illinois State University (1998) and MFA from the University of Minnesota (2008). Her recent one-person shows have included *Victoria/Veronica: Making Room* (MCA Chicago) and *Caroline Kent: What the Stars Can't Tell Us* (ISU Galleries). Her work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, DePaul Museum, Walker Art Center, and the Barack and Michelle Obama private collection, among others. Kent teaches at Northwestern University (Chicago) in the Art, Theory, and Practice department.

WRITER BIO

Camille Bacon is a Chicago-based writer and Black feminist whose practice is invested in exploring the poetics of Black abstraction.

Art Wall: Caroline Kent is organized by BAMPFA staff and curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, director, with the assistance of Christina Yang, chief curator.

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Caroline Kent: *The Sounds Among Us*, 2022; acrylic paint on wall.
Photo: Impart Photography.