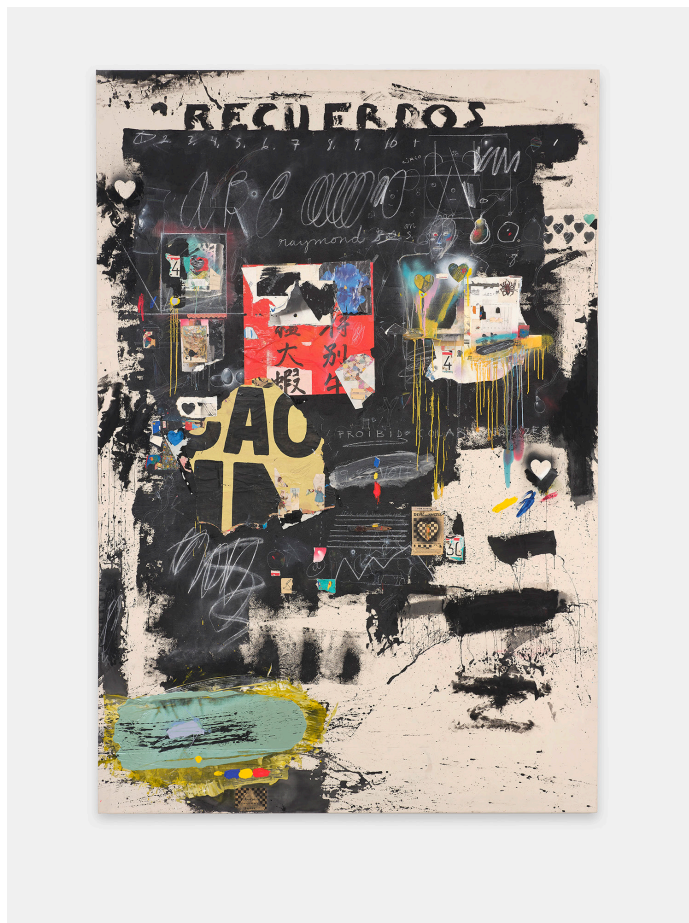


ArtSeen

Raymond Saunders

By **Andrew Paul Woolbright**



Raymond Saunders, *Recuerdos, Not in the Chair*, 1989. Mixed media on canvas, 123 x 78 1/2 inches. Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery.

Raymond Saunders's current solo exhibition at Andrew Kreps presents a series of gripping assemblages, hung on the walls like excavated fragments. The individual configurations might be referred to as slabs, panels, boards, or slates. However, thinking of the works instead as decks of culture or rafts of visuality may lend us a better lens for interpreting the work. The plywood panels and doors used as image supports are weathered, providing a textured and resonant material history that Saunders skillfully contrasts with the faded notational drawings, collected memorabilia, and enigmatic indexes of painting that he adds to their surfaces. Together, they feel like a collection of excised cultural strata, core samples, or even a modernist's take on frescoes.

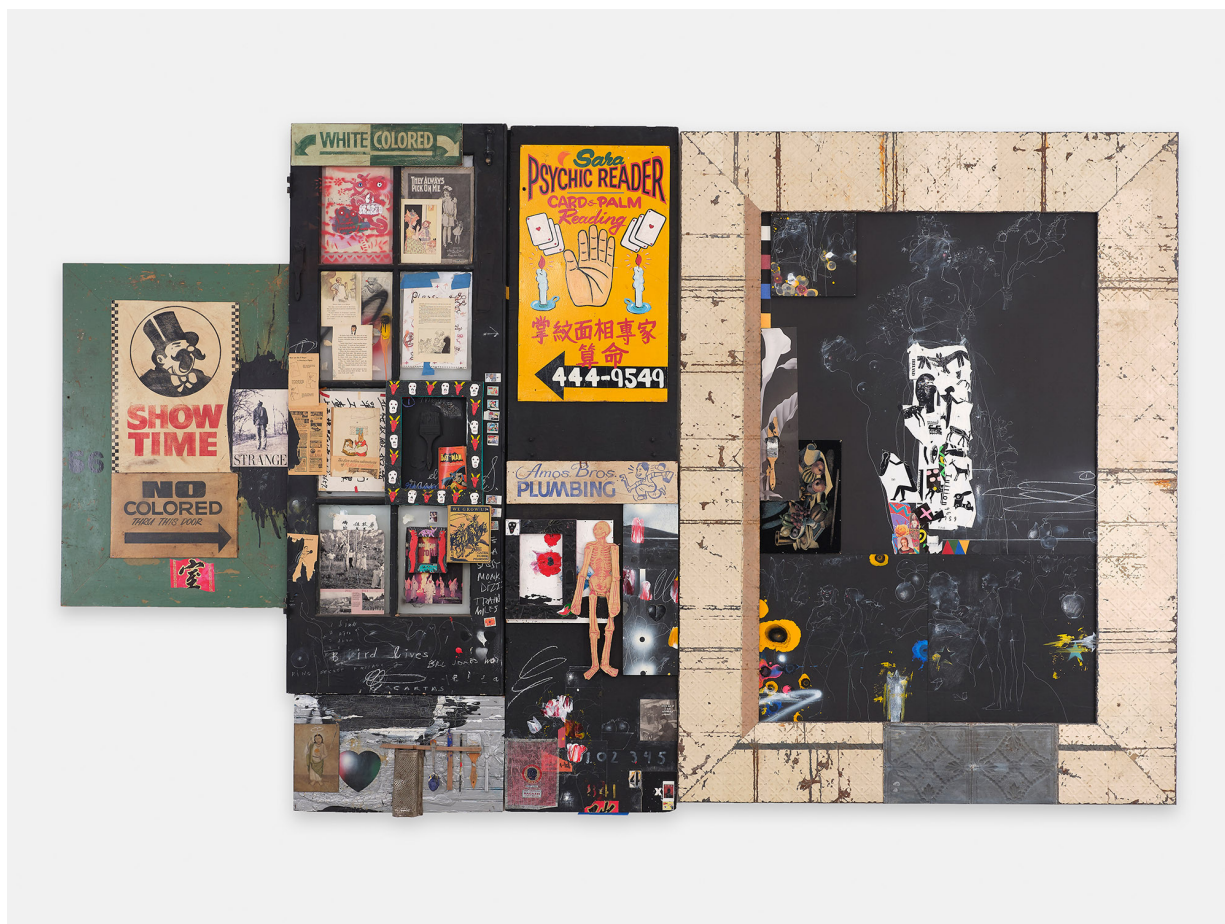
ON VIEW

Andrew Kreps

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The relationships of Saunders's constellated images to the readymade objects that serve as their supports often remain just beyond our reach, out of focus, lingering like enigmatic nebulae. This opacity is, to some degree, by design: 11 of the 15 works in the exhibition are untitled. But at times the union of material and gesture can deliver more, extending to us meaningful gestalts that often operate as a kind of anthropological poetry. *Beauty in Darkness* (1993–99), for example, is the result of six years of storage and accumulation. In it, Saunders has gathered racist depictions of Black bodies drawn from advertisements and children's literature, affixing them to a door under a sign that separates “white” and “colored” bodies.



Raymond Saunders, *Beauty in Darkness*, 1993–99. Mixed media, collage on board, 96 1/2 x 180 x 6 1/2 inches. Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery.

On the surface of Saunders's collected readymade rafts are his notions, marks, and traces, his signature affect of playful uncertainty. He finds images just to lose them, forming a language of apparitions and ebullient doubt. These vestigial depictions are fragile jots and unfinished

squiggles, interrupted like David's unfinished Tennis Court Oath or freely interpretative like John Cage's sheet music. In one of Saunders's landscape-oriented untitled pieces, the contour drawing of a still life sits on a ledge—sketched in, but missing shadow and light. His aesthetic is one that meaningfully guides us through interruptions, more concerned with echoes than sound. Paul Valéry described poems as “prolonged hesitation[s] between sound and meaning.” In Saunders's work we feel the same delay. The fact that most of the drawings are made on chalkboard surfaces alludes to the pedagogical; but if so, these are the marks of the wizened and gnostic professor who speaks in suggestions instead of statements, or like Lacan in his final lectures, sits without speaking, only folding Möbius strips.

Most often, the ready-made materials within the work feel like they drive Saunders's responses, as he uses his drawing to assist and balance their associative force. Although they work in harmony, the drawing often feels like it is played in piano, while the materials ring out in forte. In one of his untitled pieces, for example, Saunders lets a neon chartreuse flyer for a nightclub be the focus of the work. Pasted and stapled over layers of other ripped advertisements below it—thus drawing comparisons to painterly pentimento—Saunders's flyer promises us boys, ladies, and drinks, nightlife's endless cycle of desire. The artist responds with spray-painted flowers, numbering, and scribbles that, like musical accompaniment, waltz with the literal materials of the work.

Yet Saunders's marks aren't only reactions. He often uses pictorial deconstruction to probe the foundations of visual experience. At various moments, Saunders stops just as gesture begins to feel like it will cohere into a painting. His motifs remain as metonyms of pictures. Blotches of red, yellow, and blue



Raymond Saunders, *Celeste Age 5 Invited Me To Tea*, 1986.
Mixed media on canvas, 104 x 83 1/8 inches. Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery.

sit next to a roller-sized swatch in *Recuerdos, Not in the Chair* (1989): Saunders provides us the recipe of every color, but leaves it to us to visualize them. In two untitled works, Saunders includes assembled puzzles of historical paintings. In one work we find a portrait of an aristocratic boy seated at the piano, while in the other Saunders provides an unfinished puzzle, a cityscape on its side, that depicts a street alongside a river. Both play on the circulation of images and the value of art—Saunders shows us the ironic and fragile trajectory that leads from the artists' studios, to the institution, and finally to the gift shop. Here they are again, leap-frogging into the silhouette of the avant-garde.

The works on view at Andrew Kreps provide an important feeling of refuge. Take Saunders's recurring images of flying birds and flowers, as well as his affinity for doors. These motifs feel sentimental, and at times a neighbor to the plangent chords of an artist like Joseph Cornell. *Celeste Age 5 Invited Me to Tea* (1986), one of three works on canvas in the show, feels like the work of an artist trying to eternalize his past. A hopscotch grid runs up the center of the canvas, surrounded by children's drawings, food, and garbled words; the texture of a life in reverse. As Saunders finds a way to remember a day from long ago, he reassembles the playground in a space that transcends memory. Drifting through the fragmentary landscape of visual culture the artist deconstructs as he observes, making the languages of the avant-garde and the nightclub alike into beautiful debris and broken headstones.