

**Sally Scopa: MY TECTONICS**  
**Oolong Gallery March 16 — May 4, 2024**



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Lizzie Zelter: I want to start off asking about the title of the show, *MY TECTONICS*. It's a striking word combination that personalizes such a large-scale structure.

Sally Scopa: That's a great place to start. A lot of my work is about looking at the natural surroundings where I live and finding land-based metaphors for internal or emotional experiences. I'm looking outwards to find imagery and visual metaphors for experiences that are internal. At a very basic level, when I think of tectonics, I think of shifting ground. There is a lot of uncertainty in the world, not only in a political, environmental sense, but also uncertainty about how an individual should be or should live. Tectonics are a metaphor for those uncertainties: for the shifting values of an individual seeking purchase in an uncertain, shifting world.

LZ: Shifting grounds is a compelling phrase because it's apt to painting language too. I appreciate how you explore figure and ground both figuratively and materially. How do you physically begin a painting and what kind of layering techniques are part of your process?

SS: On a material level, it starts with building up seven layers of gesso.

LZ: Seven?

SS: Yeah, six or seven. I think it's something to do with thinking about strata and building up layers before I start. Then, I usually divide the canvas into an area that is textured and an area that is flat. The subsequent steps involve a lot of revisions, very intuitively responding to the patterned and flat areas. Sometimes a figure comes out and sometimes it doesn't.

LZ: Some of the bodies in your paintings are a recognizable gender, while others are more mysterious. There is also duality and doubling across many of the compositions. How do you think about figurative representation, and when there are two bodies, what relationships are you exploring?

SS: That's a good question, because until this past year, there weren't recognizable figures. I am sort of frustrated with the idea that to paint a body, people feel they need to paint a literal image of a person. I think there are so many ways to evoke a body that don't involve having an actual

figure in the painting. For this reason, I have avoided putting figures in until now. In the past, figures always felt redundant since every painting feels to me like the story or record of a body.

I think the appearance of figures might have to do with getting married, honestly. I've never made a "forever" commitment. I'm trying to think about what it means to combine with another person and go through life with them. Working through that has required a visual language that is figurative in a more specific way.

LZ: To me, your three mattress pieces certainly imply the absence of a body. I was reflecting on stationary objects and thinking about mattresses as a domestic version of boulders. Because of their weightiness, they are the least likely things that you would move around in your home. Is there a link between these indoor and outdoor heavy resting places?

SS: That's so cool. I love that. I never really thought about that parallel. Although—are you aware of the performance art piece by Emma Sulkowicz? I was realizing the other day that she probably is the one who got me thinking about mattresses as these heavy objects, both literally and symbolically.

I live in a college town, so I walk around and the mattresses that people don't want any more are just out on the street. They have this sedimentary, hefty presence. I'm always struck by seeing mattresses on the street, this really private thing that's just left out there.

LZ: I like the idea that mattresses are a surface where history happens, encompassing hidden layers of the past.

SS: Yes, absolutely. In addition to the "history" element, I do also want my paintings to be inviting and comfortable and a place to rest for the eyes. The mattresses are sort of about that for me, inviting someone to rest in a painting.

LZ: Can you unpack the appeal of being inviting and hospitable through paintings? As a person or as an artist?

Sure. I think it's just about wanting to have an experience of relation or conversation through my paintings, rather than completely mystifying people or having a visual "monologue." I don't think too much about a generalized viewer when painting, but I always want to be honest about why I make the art: it helps me figure out how to be a person in the world and it brings me joy. I never want to obscure those essential reasons for making, which are always stronger than any given subject matter. I think viewers might identify with those needs for joy and the processing of experience and feel that the art speaks to them for those reasons.

LZ: How are you thinking about text in the works? Specifically, the indecipherable letters in *Horizontal History* and the direct text in *Welcome to the Pleasure Archipelago (Oh, Yes)*.

SS: *Horizontal History* is about what it means to be intimate with someone. It's a painting that asks, "What is the actual act that counts as sex or, more broadly, intimacy?" The initials in this piece do not represent everyone I've actually slept with, it's actually just everyone who I've laid down with, literally been horizontal with. It was an exercise I did for myself, so it feels separate from the other pieces in the show. I was thinking about Tracey Emin's tent piece.

LZ: Yes, I was about to say. I love how Emin's piece, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, plays with the language of that phrase. It makes us think about what sleeping with someone means literally versus how it's used colloquially.

SS: Absolutely. *Horizontal History* and that whole body of work with the "Oh, Yes," was happening right after the 2022 Roe v. Wade decision. I wanted to be more explicit than I might normally be. Text was a part of that. Within those two paintings, I was thinking about pushing it as a painter, asking myself why I don't ever include text, and questioning how text would limit interpretations of the work or enrich it. For "Oh, Yes," I'm happy that text is there. I wanted to do something kind of silly, but also celebratory of having a woman's body, because it wasn't feeling great in that moment.

LZ: I'm curious about your approach to groupings and smaller bodies of work. In the show, there's *Winter, Summer, Spring*, notably no Fall. *Couple* is made up of two paintings but titled as one. And then there's *Bridge* and *Raft*, which seem to be different places on the same river, if read figuratively. There are a lot of partnerships and pairings.

SS: Yes, I need to add Fall. Maybe Fall will be totally different. The other works you mention are definitely about partnership. I think many of these paintings need partners. There's a tension in that because the question becomes, oh, but then do they stand alone, or do they need their partner? That's the question I sometimes ask about my paintings and other people's paintings and then of course about myself. There's an exploration of dependency or reliance in this work. Maybe that anthropomorphizes the paintings too much, but I think it's there.

LZ: In *Winter, Summer, Spring*, I see a portrayal of a sexual encounter within a relationship. There's a certain amount of distance presented between the volcano and the figure, but that space between them feels charged. Maybe it's because the eruption is framed by legs in each painting, also evoking a sense of multiple potential outcomes.

SS: I felt like those were important pieces to make and opened up the rest of the content that I wanted to explore. I think you've helped me realize that in those pieces, I was already exploring

that content: ideas of wanting independence alongside togetherness, thoughts about how cyclical we are as beings, and of course as women. I often wonder if the fixed structure within which we conceive of many relationships can accommodate cyclical human emotions and body cycles, whether they are monthly or whether they take several years? There's such a linear structure in general to relationships in our culture, when, in reality, everyone is just this completely cyclical individual. I think a lot about how to reconcile my cyclical self to the forward marching of the world.