

By Frances Jakubek

# Lauren Brinkers and Stephan Sagmiller

In Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut, welcome to a home infused with history and legacies left and turned over, now the home and studios of Lauren Brinkers and Stephan Sagmiller. One is dwarfed by the hill of trees like a mountain range behind the house. This writer walks with the artists on a day that feels like a prolonged sunset, welcoming the end of the autumn season, where we all transition to oversized sweaters and thick socks. There are people in our lives who provide a sense of calmness when we see them. There is never second guessing if you are welcomed across the threshold

into their personal or creative space. The glow of this home is inviting and warm. The living room is filled with art books stacked high and wide, low and sprawling. The space feels like a refuge for art, a safe landing for monographs and monoliths. The sculptures in the front yard were created when this space ran as Cornwall Bridge Gallery, and the stone remains part of the legacy of the land and evidence of the collaborations that have taken place here. The right pair had to see the listing for an old house, consisting of separate structures and a large vacuous room, and feel it was for them.

**Above: Portraits of Lauren and Stephan taken by Sagmiller. Below, from left: Handmade "Desi Boot" by Lauren Brinkers. Boot construction in progress in Lauren Brinkers's Connecticut studio. Photos: Stephan Sagmiller.**

This home is for makers; these two artists are examples of creative lives and mindsets. One is inspired by how Brinkers and Sagmiller influence and encourage each other, and the space embodies that sense of support and camaraderie. We drink tea and share the good news of our lives, all of us entering new and important chapters and doing our best to stay proactive with the recent election news. We talk about community, the importance of writing and making usable things, and how sharing work will keep us all connected. I joke about obscene political signage I saw along my drive and try to remain positive, though there is an underlying ache from keeping my fingers crossed so tightly.

First, we visit Sagmiller's wing of the house. Sagmiller, who has run his own photo retouch-



**Above, from left: Stephan Sagmiller, *Broncho Grass in the Santa Monica Mountains (Bromus diandrus)*, 2023, pigment ink print, 40 x 50". *Giant Wild Rye in the Santa Monica Mountains (Elymus Condensatus)*, 2023, pigment ink print, 40 x 50". *Kikuyu at Half Moon Bay Links (Cenchrus Clandestinus)*, 2024, pigment ink print, 40 x 50". Photos by Stephan Sagmiller.**

ing company, CYAN JACK, for years, is a color genius with a relentless drive to find the correct answer or formula. One is awestruck by the order and setup for a very thoughtful workflow and how he has meticulously color-balanced all of the different lights in the room. Large prints from his "Lawn" series are displayed in the gallery space, preparing for an upcoming show at Standard Space in Sharon, Connecticut. The work investigates the usage and display of lawns in California, where the drought issue is ongoing. Sagmiller speaks about the stark contrast between two types of people in this situation: those working hard to conserve water and minimize their environmental footprint and those who flaunt their wealth and privilege by maintaining extravagant, water-hungry lawns. He says, "It would be hard not to notice that, at this point, there is very little on Earth that has not been affected by climate change. It's penetrated everything and everywhere to the point that almost every photograph made today can ultimately become a conversation about climate change and/or the politics surrounding it." The work is a meditation on the absurdity of excessive consumption in the face of environmental collapse.

We sift through books like *Schema* that emphasize this artist's interest in color, output, and image digestion. After sorting through prints to comprehend the book, Sagmiller signals that he has something that might be more this writer's speed. Brinkers looks at me and wonders what it could be. I sit down at his computer and take the journey through his photographs taken while traveling from coast to coast to visit his sick mother in her final years. She had called herself "the canary"—vulnerable to toxins and pollutants, her body a living testament to the environmental damage we often ignore. We learn where the phrase about the coal mine

originates. Sagmiller is correct that this work is my speed, fueled by emotion; the melancholy blue holds us throughout the series with a reoccurring dash of hopeful yet vulnerable yellow.

We enjoy a warm lunch prepared by Brinkers, and then step outside the house to her studio. Brinkers' space is a colorful world of layers—leathers, paints, and heavy machinery—each element brimming with intention and creativity. A former nurse turned shoemaker, Brinkers' work is as much about protection as it is about artistry. Every shoe she creates is a labor of love, meticulously crafted by hand with the same care she once gave to her patients.

Brinkers' work challenges all preconceived notions about shoes—those everyday objects we rarely stop to consider. This writer watches in awe as she carefully stitches a sole, using a Lockstitch McKay machine that looks as dangerous as it is effective. There is something deeply satisfying about witnessing her stitch the seams into the leather, her body weight pressing down with intention, each motion driven by years of expertise. Though the shoes may appear delicate, adorned with hand-painted designs inspired by artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, they are incredibly durable, molded to fit and protect the foot.

The colors Brinkers chooses and describes are driven by emotion, "the happiest red you ever did see," and reference periods in art, such as her "Dutch" (Masters) collection, by use of color, mood, and design. Her application of unpredictable dyes is inspired by painter Helen Frankenthaler, who once said, "One really beautiful wrist motion that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it. It looks as if it were born in a minute." The sketches and designs that adorn Brinkers' walls tell the story of each collection, while the room itself is filled with the remnants of her creative process—fabric scraps, test strokes of paint, and finished

shoes that seem to echo landscapes, each one as unique as the person who will wear it.

Brinkers explains how the absence of rubber in the soles connects us to the Earth—how our feet are kept in direct contact with the ground, allowing us to remain "ionic," which refers to a pathway for ions to flow directly from an object to the Earth and in tune with the world around us. It's a concept that resonates deeply, especially when paired with her commitment to creating functional yet gorgeous pieces.

What's most profound about Brinkers' and Sagmiller's work is how differently they connect to the Earth. Yet, their crafts are intimately linked by their commitment to beauty, sustainability, and protection. One creates through the manipulation of color and light, the other through texture, form, and function. Together, they embody a creative partnership grounded in mutual respect, constant inspiration, and a shared belief in the power of making things with intention and care.

Frances Jakubek is an image maker, independent curator, and consultant for artists. She is the co-founder of the large-scale photographic collaboration A Yellow Rose Project, past director of the Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York City, and past associate curator of the Griffin Museum of Photography in Massachusetts.

stephansagmiller.com  
laurenbrinkers.com