



A Rainbow, 2002
Found object 19 x 19 [framed]

Diana Guerrero-Maciá
2004



My First Painting, 1982
tempera on board
27 x 22

Words are not signs, they are years.

Octavio Paz

STANDARDS

Lisa Wainwright

Diana Guerrero-Maciá's pictures need a lot of room; their commanding simplicity demands it.

Like color-field painting beset upon by advertising graphics, Guerrero-Maciá's strips of cool color and swirls of Op design back up crisp vernacular text. The words in Guerrero-Maciá's pictures work more as form than language, punctuating big flat color areas with line, shape, and hue, and adjusting the weight of the picture's composition. Content draws from that happy occurrence of "Significant Form" (Clive Bell, *Art*, 1914) that so defined an aspect of modernism, and yet these are works clearly of their age. They are not pigment on canvas, but hand-stitched pieces of leather, ultrasuede, and vinyl. Guerrero-Maciá is a cool customer whose hipster materials traffic in the world of modernism, but whose labor of sewing undercuts the masculine assumptions that modernism so often engendered.

Guerrero-Maciá belongs to a generation of painters who use everything but paint. Her earliest collage-based work incorporated found materials, but she turned to fabric more exclusively in the nineties, enjoying the borrowed palette and found texture. Discarding the idea that suggestive color à la Mark Rothko must be made, Guerrero-Maciá saw the local color of thrift store clothing and fabrics as fully accommodating her formal moves. In “Everybody’s Velvet Painting” from 2002, leather from a woman’s jacket, suede from a vest, and an old tablecloth are cut, stretched and sewn into stark type set into a velvety black field. “All American Painting” of 2002 includes neoprene from a wet-suit in concert with red and white wools. In “Anybody’s Authentic Revolution,” also from 2002, Guerrero turns a swatch of safety-orange polar fleece and a wool blanket into a vertiginous abstract pattern highlighted by animated text. The words in the pictures are similarly borrowed. Like concrete poetry, she explains, Guerrero-Maciá shifts and edits phrases and titles from different sources – most often from cheap record cover albums she collects while shopping for her used fabrics. With “Everybody’s Velvet Painting”, the word “STANDARDS” in bright colors hovers above a modestly purple “ARE FREE,” while in “Happiness Is (Blood and Chocolate)”, from 2003, Guerrero-Maciá absents the blood and chocolate, leaving “HAPPINESS IS” as a floating afterimage. Like the best of hip hop sampling to which she is drawn, Guerrero-Maciá achieves perfect pitch with the fragments of discordant passages set against bold designs.

Through Guerrero-Maciá’s art, viewers are reminded of how found material has served artists for decades. From Robert Rauschenberg and Louise Nevelson at mid-20TH century to the more recent work of Jason Rhoades and Sarah Sze, an astonishing range of effects has been achieved through the uncanny marriage of art and life. In 1962, Robert Rauschenberg captured the spirit of 20TH century art when he famously suggested that working in the gap between art and life (Dorothy

Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans*, 1959) made art more relevant, more true, more “like the real world” (Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 1980). This rallying cry of the avant-garde was only possible in a century of mass production and display, where the plethora of man-made stuff became a rich resource for artistic interventions. Since Picasso and Duchamp, artists have been free to recycle the abundance of material culture, sometimes as critics of rampant materialism, but more often as curious bricoleurs turning straw into gold. While Guerrero-Maciá figures in this most radical of media from the last century, her use of non-art materials is more in line with that of Picasso, John Chamberlain or Louise Nevelson. The original identities of the objects in her work are no longer intact, but rather become an aesthetic part of a larger composition. Picasso’s use of common wallpaper in his cubist rendering of guitars, or Chamberlain’s scrap automobile parts as elegant arabesques in neo-baroque assemblages, works the same way.

There are times in Guerrero-Maciá’s art, however, when the action of “finding” serves a different role. In her large sculpture “Unravelling the Rainbow” from 2003, the artist copped a student project gone awry and turned it into furniture. An irregular color wheel served as the basic design for a segmented circular lounge. Guerrero-Maciá describes the soft sculpture as “movable furniture for a restless generation,” but what’s really of interest is how color theory cum furniture reveals the permeable contours of disciplines that this “restless generation” so enjoys. In “My First Painting, Twenty-One Years Later” from 2003, Guerrero-Maciá’s source material was her own teenage study of a clown. Discovered stashed away in her father’s attic, the painting was surprising in how close its flat color and bold text looked like the current work. In this instance, Guerrero-Maciá appropriated her own original creation in a kind of uncanny, postmodern jab at authenticity in art.

“My First Painting, Twenty-One Years Later,” like all the other work, is made from myriad fabrics stiched together. Guerrero-Maciá does the stiching by hand, typically with five stiches per inch. The stiched line is intentionally apparent, characteristically quirky, lending her otherwise handsome post-post-painterly abstractions an air of feminist intent. Stiches and fabric refer to feminist art history like no other medium. Miriam Schapiro and the Femmage movement of the seventies claimed it as a viable material for high art, hoping to elevate what had been traditionally seen as mere women’s craft. Ghada Amer, Annette Messager, and Tracy Emin, among others, continue to explore stiching as a subversive means of engaging women’s issues. Amer and Emin in particular are close to Guerrero-Maciá in their seamstress bad girl aesthetic. For all three artists the quilting bee/pajama party activity is now in the service of hot eroticism, bawdy narrative, and punky cowboy prose (maybe it was always so).

Like a girl inclined to wear cowboy boots to the prom, Guerrero-Maciá’s recurring use of cowboys in the text of her work inflects the pictures with a tough veneer. She nods to postcolonial discourse of the day as well, in that she muses on an icon that refers to everything from Spanish colonization to the reign of the cowboy presidency of George W. Bush. As Guerrero-Maciá takes the word “cowboy” from picture to picture, changing the typography and the ground, the word’s meaning subtly changes—this is exactly her point. The promiscuity of iconographic latitude, Guerrero-Maciá suggests, has all but wiped out historical profundity.

What’s left of the cowboy in the cowboy pictures, perhaps, is an emblem of stoic individualism. Indeed, the cowboy streak runs through Guerrero-Maciá’s work, sometimes in the choice of text and sometimes suggested through her materials. “A Big, Big Red” from 2003, for example, is a feisty piece, with its large field of scarred leather replete with the odor of a tanned hide

and a puncture hole from the meat hook upon which the carcass once hung. And yet the picture is elegantly stiched and stately composed. The red and white composition is striking, with the artist shining up her cowboy gear to look like big modernist painting. Guerrero-Maciá takes from art history, thrift store detritus, poetry, and vernacular prose, shifting materials and signifiers with imaginative verve and monumental effect. She is an artist educated in the lessons of her modernist fathers, but able to unpack their conceits. More inclusive in process, material, and meaning, Guerrero-Maciá’s visual thoughts are totally popular and completely refined.

concrete propositions

(in order)

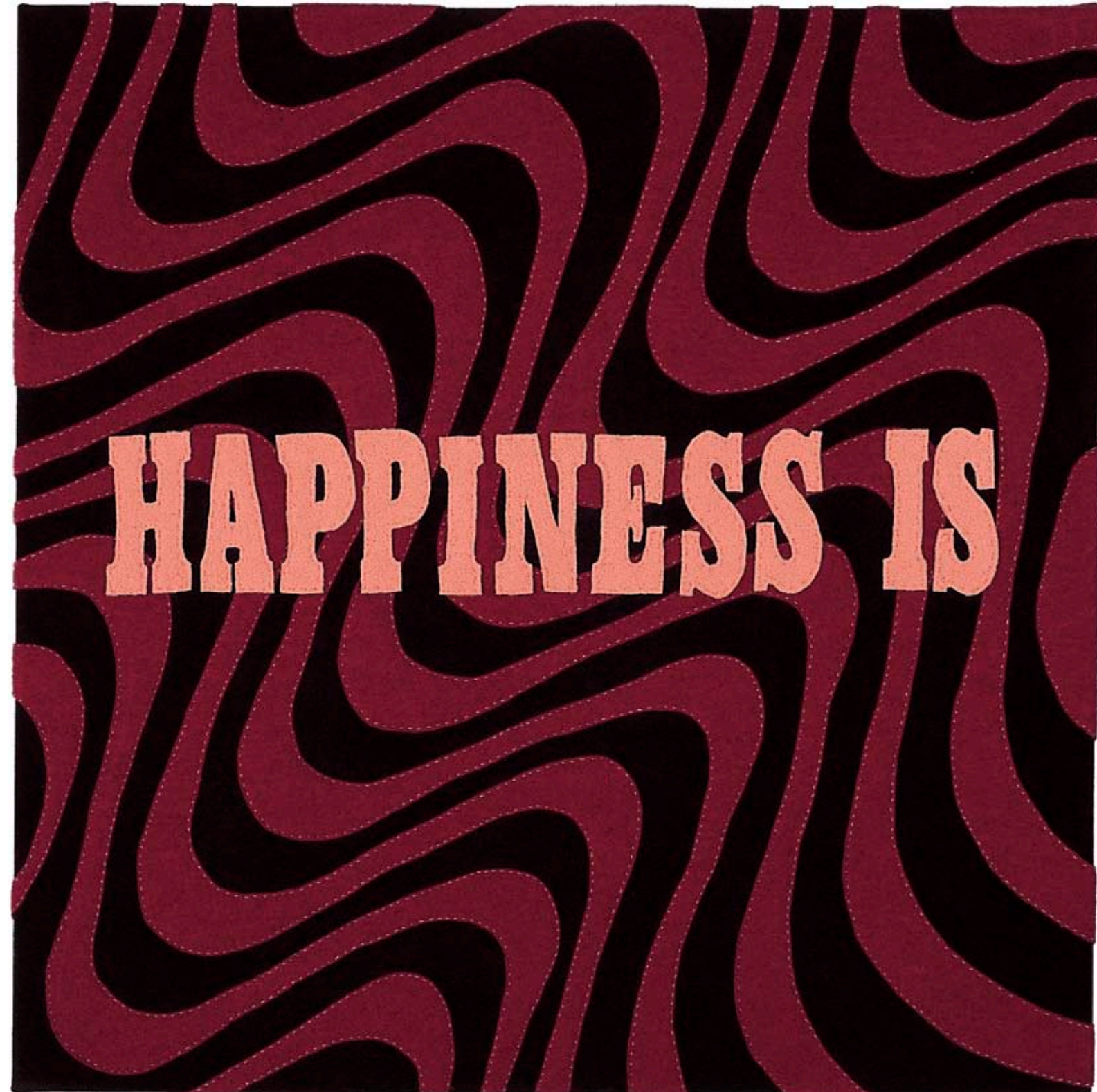
Happiness Is, 2003
wool, suede, and cotton. 29 x 29

All American Painting, 2003
Wool, neoprene, and cotton. 48 x 48
collection of Henry Haley

Everybody's Velvet Painting, 2002
vinyl, ultrasuede, cotton, velvet, and cotton. 48 x 48

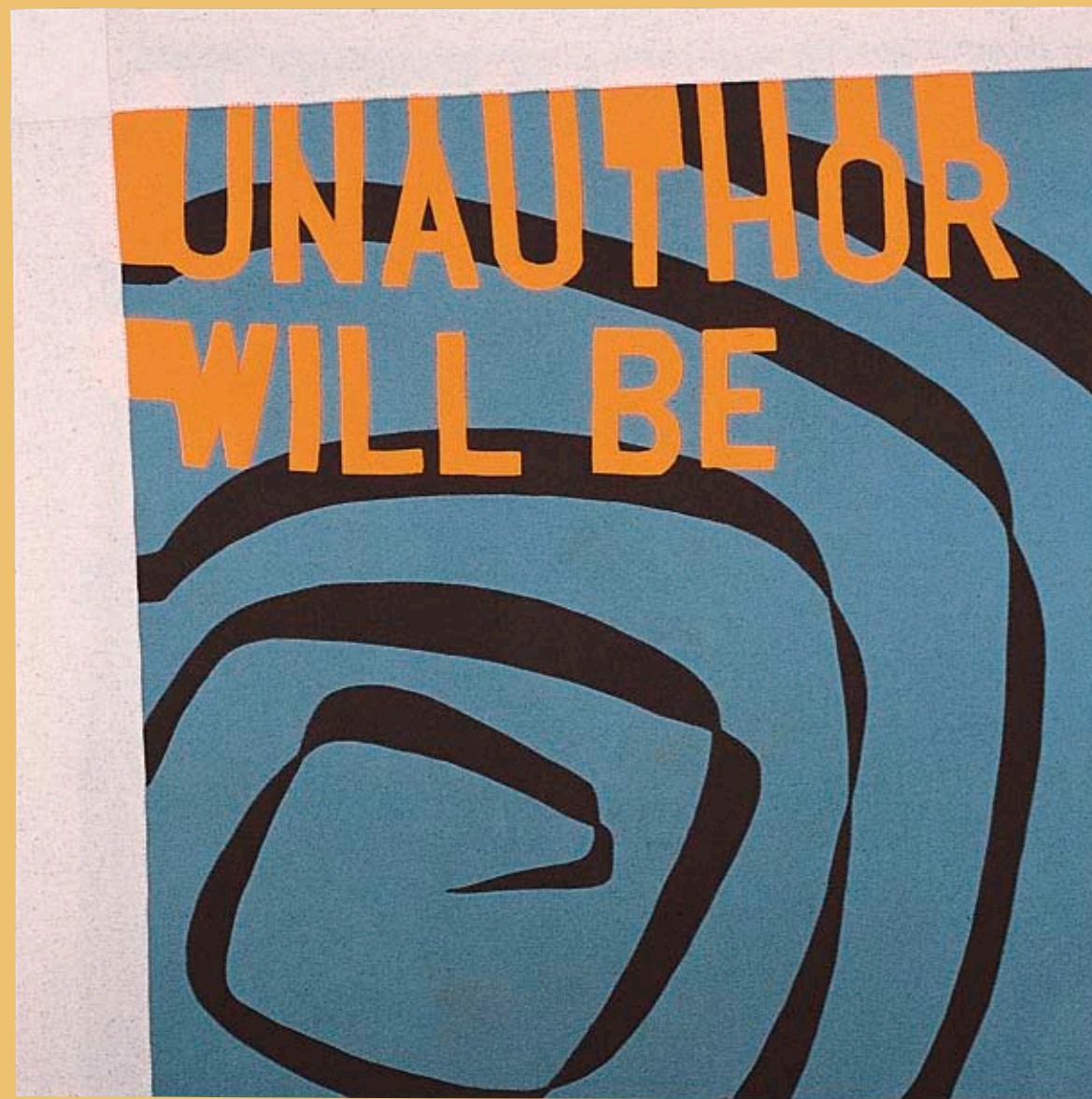
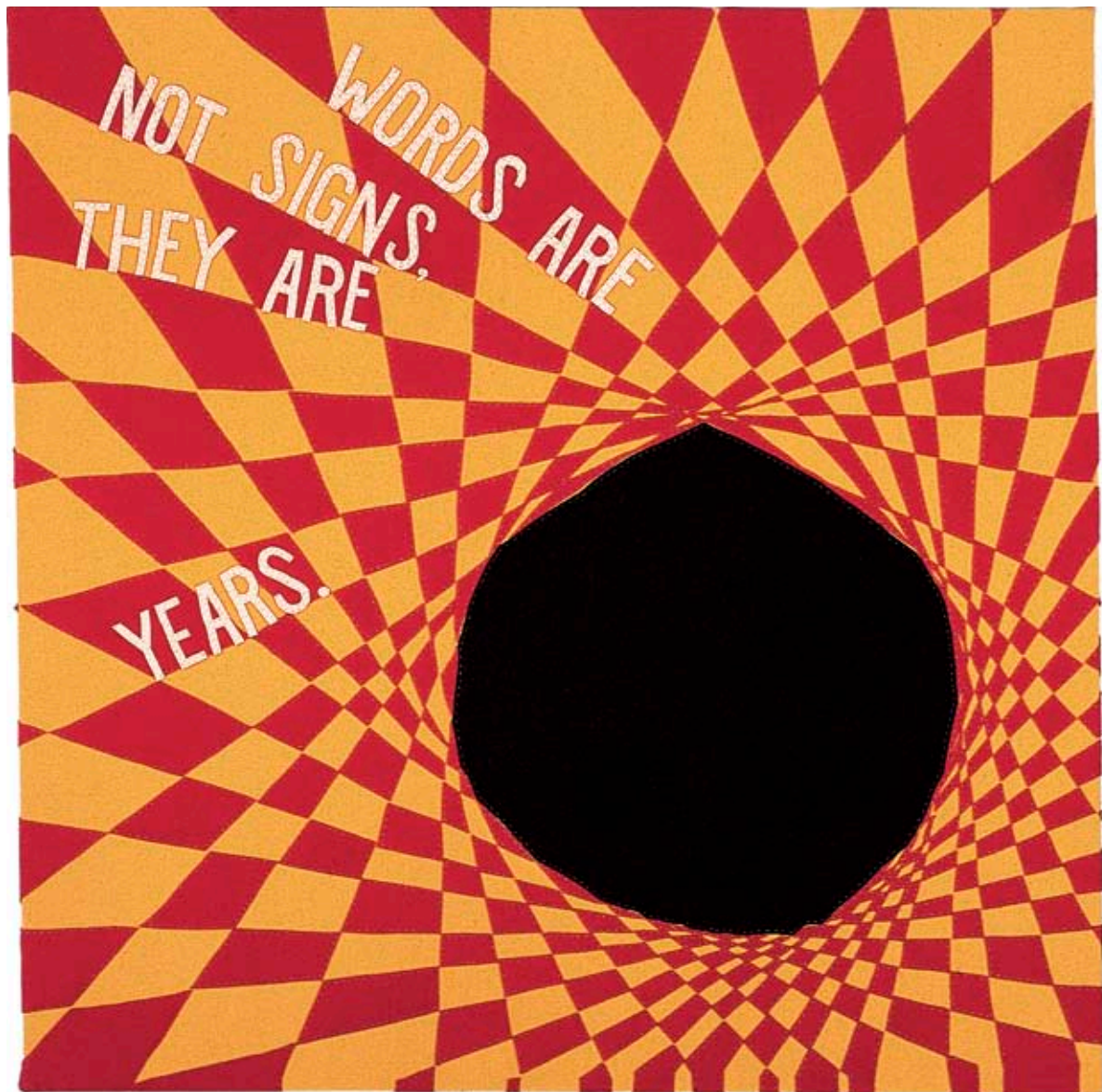
Concrete Painting for an Abstract Generation, 2003
wool and cotton. 48 x 48

Anybody's Authentic Revolution, 2002
wool, polar fleece, and cotton. 60 x 60

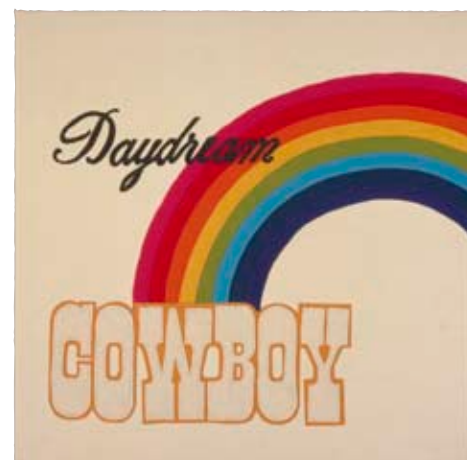
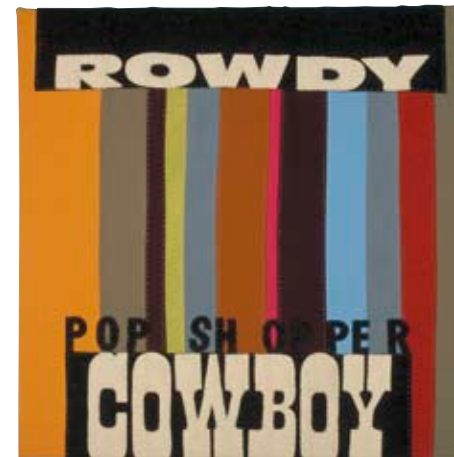


JUST
EVENING
brilliant

STANDARDS
ARE FREE



everybody needs
a little cowboy



Daydream Cowboy, 2003
wool, polyester, vinyl, and cotton,
26 x 26

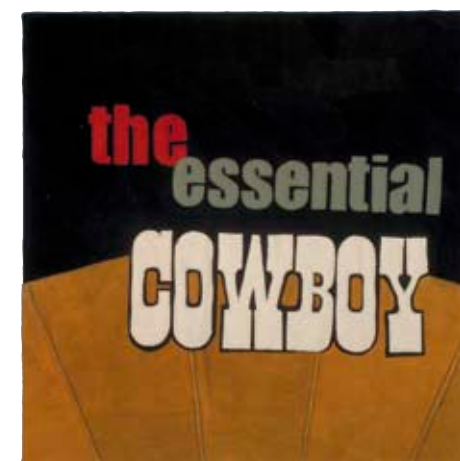
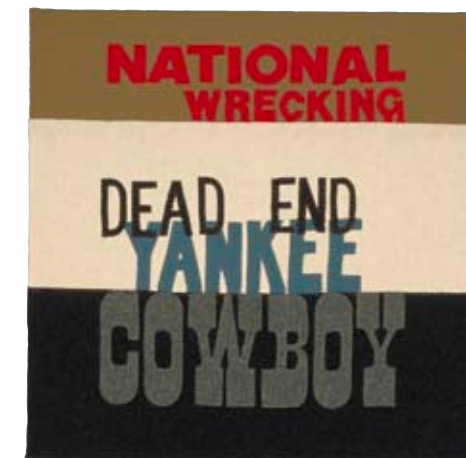
This Cowboy Nation, 2002
wool, leather, and cotton, 26 x 26

Future Cowboy, 2002
wool, suede, and cotton, 26 x 26

Rowdy Pop Shopper Cowboy, 2003
wool, vinyl, ultrasuede, and cotton,
26 x 26

The Essential Cowboy, 2003
wool, leather, and cotton, 26 x 26

Dead End Yankee Cowboy, 2003
wool, and cotton, 26 x 26





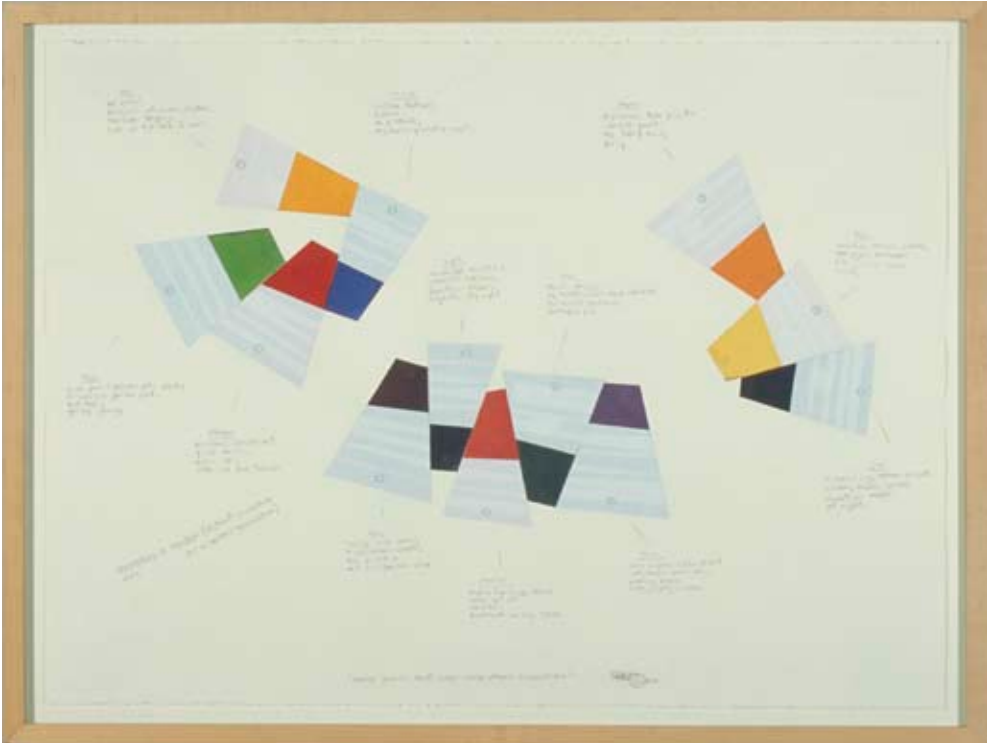
**A
BIG BIG
RED**

A Big Big Big Red, 2003
Leather
85 x 132

unravelling the rainbow



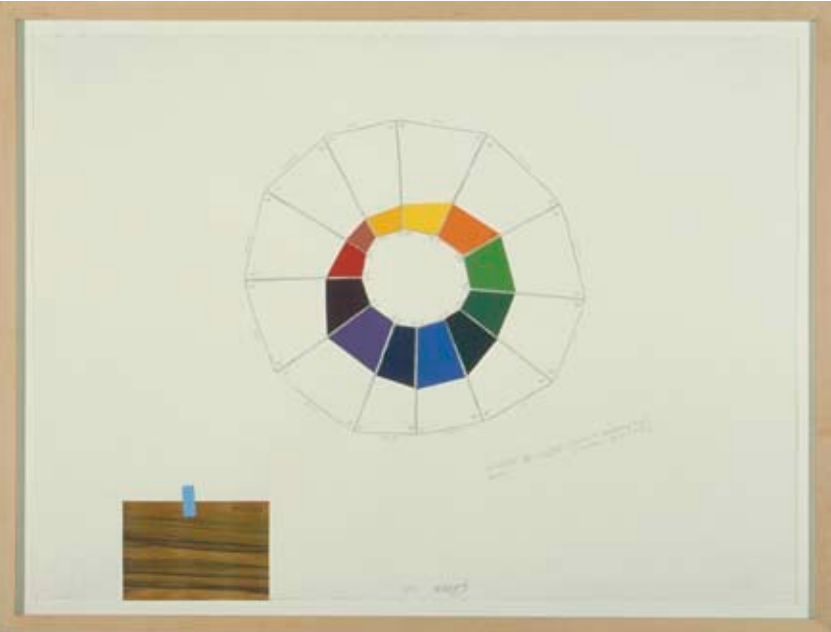
A Rainbow, 2002
Found object 19 x 19 [framed]



Study, 2002
graphite and collage on paper
22 x 30



Study, 2002
graphite and collage on paper
30 x 22



Study, 2002
graphite and collage on paper
22 x 30

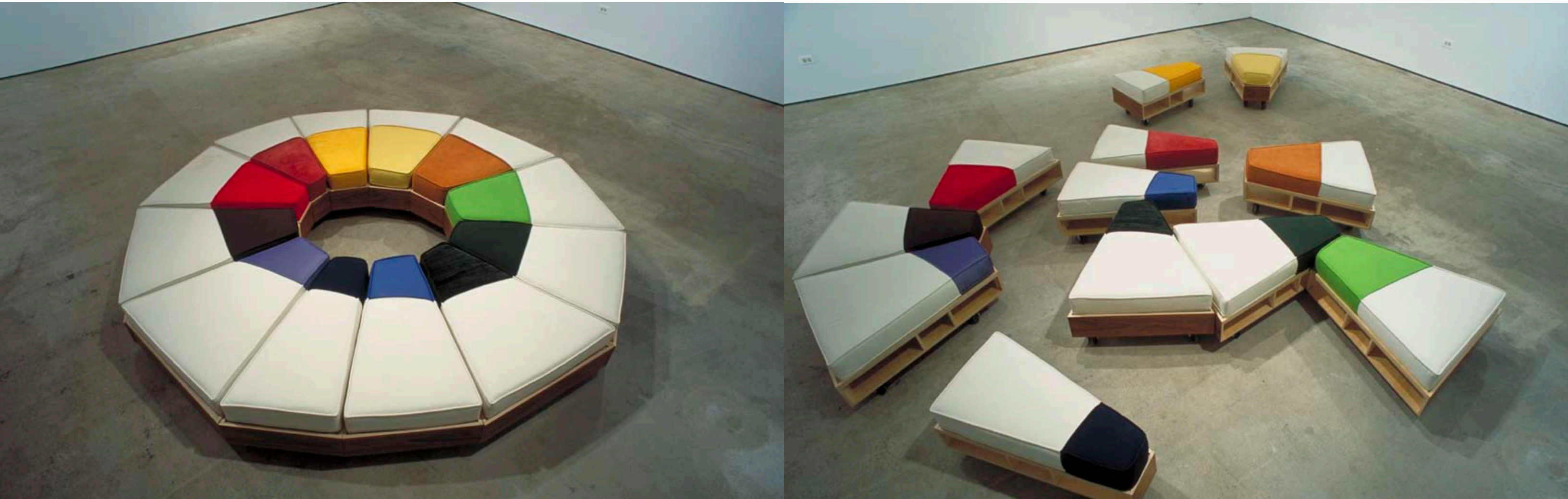
Unravelling the Rainbow, 2003

Installation views

Gallery 400 @ University of Illinois at Chicago

Plywood with rosewood veneer, casters and upholstered cushions

Dimensions variable. *Collection of Todd Simon.*



my first painting twenty-one
years later



My First Painting Twenty-One Years Later, 2003
wool, vinyl, polyester, cotton, and embroidery floss
82 x 110, diptych



Installation view
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

INTERVIEW WITH STACI BORIS

December 2003

Staci Boris: I know you work in different forms, from hand-sewn text-based pieces to installations based on found objects to paper collages. What do you see as the connecting element among these formats?

Diana Guerrero-Maciá: I have always been interested in the possibility of a found object being a catalyst for an idea, and how that can then be reversed. The underlying current is the notion of the serendipity of finding. I'm curious about what happens when ideas are presented to you, and by selecting and editing what is already out there like sampling, you can make something else.

sb: What attracts you to a certain idea or a certain text?

DGM: I am interested in the quality of color that locates something culturally or within a specific era. But probably the most interesting thing is that there's a sense of longing, and at the same time a kind of hopeful quality that an object can imbue. Maybe it reveals a mistake or a misinterpretation or a cast-off. I like the idea of something that's not quite right and how can that be made right or be celebrated for that wrongness.

sb: And do you find meaning in that erroneous quality or is it symbolic and emblematic of a certain idea or desire?

DGM: Well, I think it references the activity of selection. We have so many choices, and there are so many things that could be celebrated, especially in popular culture. I suppose I'm curious about championing the underdog. What qualities does something have that are not immediately revealed?

sb: Perhaps this is a good lead-in to talk about Unravelling the Rainbow because some of things you're talking about were inspiration for that piece. Do you want to describe the work?

DGM: The piece is part functional object and part sculptural object – a meditation about what is right and wrong within a fixed order. I found a hand-painted color wheel that a student of mine had discarded in the trash; the colors were out of order and had been mixed with white, and each color wedge had different proportions and angles. I thought this thing was so wrong it was right. It had a quality of nonchalance about it that revealed his nonchalance about the assignment, which I appreciated. Conceptually I was interested in the idea that the physical representation of something like the colors of the rainbow, which is a fixed order based on the separation of light, is not debatable. But, the visual representation of that idea becomes subject. Additionally, I had been thinking about making

a piece of moveable furniture to reference the restlessness of my generation, but I did not know what form it should take. Finding the color wheel and assigning it to this problem became a great answer. Because each wedge of color was a different size, the only way all the pieces would come together was the wrong way, and that became the right way.

sb: It was a circular form in which each wedge of color was an individual seat that could separate, and it resembled mid-century modern furniture. I've noted in your work that you often reference graphic design and visual elements of a different era, whether it's mid-century modern or pop culture from the 60s and 70s. What is your attraction to these eras? Do you intend to imbue your work with a sense of nostalgia?

DGM: I'm very much aware of wanting to make something in a contemporary way, but it's important to say that if you are resolved to finding things that have been discarded, they will tend to be from a previous stylistic era. I do look at Minimalism and Pop but also objects that are made based on a spareness that isn't by design so much, but by necessity, like the Amish, or Liberian architecture. This is what they have, and it is very simple to cut a bunch of squares up or reuse clothing and put it into a quilt. I think it relates to the idea of living in this really generous and overwhelming society where you have so much choice. I like objects that reveal limits on those choices.

sb: Do you give yourself parameters in which to work?

DGM: I do. I think because sometimes there is a sort of density in the information I'm trying to translate, to reveal what is already out there, so I try to edit out a lot of things.

sb: Unravelling the Rainbow doesn't have any text in it, which is one of the main elements I always associate with your work. Was that a departure from previous work?

DGM: It's not so much a departure – I think it is a nice break. Some projects don't need text. Sometimes in the text-based works I am actually trying to be didactic or rhetorical. And other times I'm not.

sb: Can you talk about how you first began to work with text? You studied painting, and you eventually moved into making paintings without paint. How did you go from being a painting student to actually making hand-sewn text pieces?

DGM: I think it was a very natural evolution. I used to write a lot, and I've always been interested in narrative painting and poetry. I'm also interested in the shape of words and in drawing words. I'm curious about the trans-medial relationship between the word and the representation of it. My early work was built on the relationship between image and text. There just became a certain point when I realized that I should take the image out and leave the text. I was influenced by graphic design, advertisements, and billboards – the visual bombardment with language. Once you start tuning into that, it's easy to find signs that dictate positions. I want to play with that sense of authorship.

sb: That sense of authority and power.

DGM: I like the idea of what it is to be an author, and the idea of authority within authorship. Especially in relation to authorship of the found, suddenly you're editing an idea, but you're using other people's ideas. Then what does your position become? I think I've long understood my role as artist is as a visual editor – recombining elements and sampling.

sb: There were artists who pared down art to just text and language in the 60s and 70s, like Lawrence Weiner. Were these artists influential to you?

DGM: When I was starting to work with text, I knew about Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Bruce Nauman, Robert Indiana, and Ed Ruscha. Certain pieces by all of them had strong impact on me. Early on, I was also influenced by Stuart Davis, Ellsworth Kelly, Ralston Crawford, and Marsden Hartley. I think the hard-edge lines of American Modernism were interesting to me because it tied in to the graphic design sensibility that I'm curious about, and pop advertising. Likewise, my parents are fairly intellectual and engaged in the arts in different ways. My mother introduced me to poetry and quilting, and my father introduced me to industrial design of the past century. That probably goes back to the question of what attracts you to something. Not only what something is and its history, but how is it physically formed, and what it reveals.

sb: So now we know how the image disappeared. How did paint disappear?

DGM: Fundamentally I still believe I paint at times, because I've always loved painting – using fields of color, form, and materials to create a space. I used to mix paint with wax mediums to allude to the texture of fabric, but I found that dissatisfying technically. I increasingly found myself more interested in the real texture of fabric. I wasn't interested in painting as a method of creating an illusion of something, I was interested in the actual thing.

sb: So you decided to stop painting the fabric and just use the real thing?

DGM: I realized there wasn't a great difference between finding an old curtain, cutting it up, and stretching it from stretching the canvas, and then painting it the color of the curtain. Maybe it seemed irreverent to use it to make a painting, especially if the object was discarded.

sb: Do you then consider your work in the context of contemporary painting?

DGM: Some of it, I do. But it also falls under other categories. There are so many contemporary artists whose work is interdisciplinary in the materials they use. My work can function as painting; it shares that visual language. What shifts is the material in the making of them. I like that, because it does position them in certain places between the histories of different media. I can argue positioning a painting and a quilt next to each other and calling them both the same thing. However, what to call them becomes the point of debate.

sb: With regard to the relationship of painting to your work, I wanted to talk about the MCA project that we worked on together [My First Painting Twenty-One Years Later.] You re-made a painting that you made in high school. Do you want to describe that?

DGM: I dug this old painting out of my father's attic a few years ago and was charmed by it. The painting was my response to an art class assignment "to make a painting." I ended up making a poster advertising a fictitious circus, appropriated from images from Victorian circus posters. It had a few technical problems in the drawing and the painting, but it looked strikingly like the work I had been making recently. The confluence of having

just done the rainbow project with my student's color wheel, remaking someone else's mistakes, I was interested in what would happen if I turned that activity onto my own practice. I thought it would be fair to remake this poster after twenty-one years, by hand sewing and embroidering fabric to replicate it and to position it again as a painting, challenging what a painting could be.

sb: It also captures the passage of time, especially with the mildew you faithfully re-created on the clown's face.

DGM: That was one of the most interesting parts of making the piece. After painstakingly remaking this painting, destroying the face with all these grotesque spots was a difficult thing to do. What's weird is that it ended up being disconcerting but at the same time very beautiful.

sb: You used a number of different materials in that. Some things you bought for the ground, but also strange bits of clothing. How do you go about seeking out all of these materials, and are any of them symbolic?

DGM: In all of my projects, I choose to find the materials I use. It becomes an interesting challenge to have to find used clothes, and fabrics to exactly match the colors of a piece I am re-making. For that project, I carried the original painting with me to many thrift shops, looking for clothes that were the right match of color. As for the symbolism I try to find materials that not only have the same color, but that also carry functional and tactile histories with them, like leather, velvet, or neoprene.

sb: A sense of discovery.

DGM: I like the adventure. I have the found object and then I have to remake it. So I have to do the opposite of what I did to

find it. I have to put myself in a place where finding the thing to match it may occur.

sb: Can you describe the reasoning behind your inclusion of a second panel in the piece to make it a diptych?

DGM: I knew I didn't want it to be just a direct copy. I had been making diptychs using optical illusions and visual patterns that created a disjunction between the parts. I wanted to be able to position this project within my current practice. I wondered if I made it a diptych, how could the second part modify the first? The black-and-white target is a very strong graphic tool, and it draws your eye into the face of the clown, shifting your sight. The two framed collages in the installation echoed that relationship. One collage uses an Amy Gerstler poem about the metaphor of sight. I had edited the poem to change the meaning, and it served the same purpose that the target served. You start to make these associations, about the act of seeing something, and then seeing it new.

sb: Let's talk about the show you did at Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery around the idea of the cowboy – the word, the myth. What led you to create that work? I see, more than in the other works, a political undercurrent. Was that intentional?

DGM: *This Cowboy Nation*, the exhibition, was actually two groups of work. Half of the show was a body of work called *Everybody Needs a Little Cowboy* and the other half was a body of work called *Concrete Propositions*. The cowboy project had more of the political undercurrent I think you are referring to. I started that project after investigating cowboys. I'd recently come back from Spain, and I'd been fascinated with the bullfighters. It is this very chivalrous, noble activity. What I came to understand is that the iconic image of an American cowboy is based on this Spanish influence. The original cowboys

were Mexican Indians who were taught by the Spaniards how to ride horses. Their clothes were based on the matador's outfit, the suit of light. Likewise, the Texas longhorn cattle were first bred from the bulls that were bred to be fought in Spain. These American icons are historically linked to Spanish colonization. What I wanted to investigate was the very American idea that our history is rooted in other places. So the common reading of something is often misread. The myth of the cowboy has been used over and over again to sell products, lifestyles, actors, and presidents. I asked myself, what if I took the word cowboy and tried to position it six different times, with several different sampled words that would visually position a cowboy into less common cultural meanings? The Second Gulf War started after I began the project and one piece I made in direct response to it, *National Wrecking, Dead-end Yankee Cowboy*, was my homage to G.W. Bush. Another piece, *All American Painting*, referenced Andy Warhol's appropriation of the Brillo pad logo in the type and included sublimated text constructed in white on white from a Nike logo that stated "Just Fucking Brilliant." So yes, some of the work has political undercurrents.

sb: What are you working on now?

DGM: I'm developing a project right now that is based on a found soccer ball. I'm interested in the playfulness and the folly of it. I don't know if that's vanity, I don't want to be irresponsible, but the possibilities that come with it inspire me.

DIANA GUERRERO-MACIÁ

Lives and works in Chicago

Teaches at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago

AWARDS

- 2001 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award
- 1998 The MacDowell Colony Fellowship
- 1992 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Fellowship
- 1990 Phillip Morris Foundation Graduate Fellowship

EDUCATION

- 1992 Cranbrook Academy of Art, MFA Painting
- 1992 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
- 1988 Villanova University, BFA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 *My First Painting, Twenty-One Years Later;* 12 x 12 Exhibitions
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
This Cowboy Nation;
Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2000 *Perfect Lovers;* Museum of Contemporary Art, Saint Louis; St. Louis, MO
- 1998 *Position is Where You Put It;* Artemisia Gallery; Chicago, IL
Sewings; Network Gallery, Bloomfield Hills, MI
- 1996 Contemporary Art Workshop; Chicago, IL

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 *Color Value;* Gallery 400;
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL
Social Patterns; Northeastern Illinois University; Chicago
The Big Picture Show; Betty Rymer Gallery,
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
- 2002 *Cheap;* White Columns; New York
Just What It Says;
Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery, Chicago
Hobby Lobby; Gallery 312; Chicago
Blue Blood Blue Collar; Heaven Gallery, Chicago
Prestar = borrow + lend; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago
- 2001 *Chicago and Vicinity with a Bias;*
Klein Art Works, Chicago
Fluid Interfaces; Gallery 2, Chicago
- 2000 *Soap Number Three; No Name Exhibitions*
@ The Soap Factory; Minneapolis
Of intrinsic Nature: transformando lo ordinario;
Chicago Park District, Chicago
- 1999 *Washington University Art Faculty Exhibition;*
Mitchell Museum; Mt. Vernon, IL
- 1998 *One Night Stand;* Critical Mass; St. Louis, MO
- 1996 *Abstract Chicago;* Klein Art Works; Chicago
13TH Biennial Exhibition;
Evanston Art Center; Evanston, IL
- 1995 *Corazón Latino, Four Latina Artists;*
University of Chicago; Chicago
- 1994 *Visual Play;* Textile Art Center; Chicago
The Shape of Things;
Contemporary Art Workshop; Chicago
ToyBomb!; Hyde Park Art Center; Chicago

CONTRIBUTORS

Staci Boris is Associate Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago where she has worked since 1992. She has organized a number of exhibitions, among them; John Currin, William Kentridge, Strange Days, and My Little Pretty: Images of Girls by Contemporary Women Artists.

Lisa Wainwright is the Interim Dean of Graduate Studies and Professor, Department of Art History, Theory, & Criticism at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently completing a volume of essays on the history of found objects in 20th century art.

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APPROPRIATED SOURCE MATERIAL

American Recording Company, *Big Red Music*, 1978
Brilliant; *Mixed Fierce Soul Murder*, 1984
Dan Terry, *Big Big Band*, 1981
Ellis Larkin, *Do Nothing Until You Hear From Me*, 1953
The Essential Wolfhounds, *The Essential Wolfhounds*, 1988
Future, *Down That Country Road*, 1978
Glen Miller, *The Best of Glen Miller Vol. III*, 1969
The Godfathers, *This Damn Nation*, 1983
Hil Bowen and His Orchestra, *Standards in Stereo*, 1959
National Geographic Society, *Cowboy Songs*, 1976
National Wrecking Demolition Company
Nike Corporation
Octavio Paz, *Flame and Speech*, translated by Mark Strand, 1978
Ray Coniff; *Happiness Is*, 1966
RCA Victor, *The Fabulous Fifty-Fifth*, 1955
Roger Williams, *Daydreams*, 1958
T-Boz, *Touch Myself*, 1986
Viennese Symphonic Orchestra, *One Hour of Straus Waltzes*, 1962

