

**DEVoured  
BY SYMBOLS**

DIANA GUERRERO-MACIÁ







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BY SYMBOLS**

DIANA GUERRERO-MACIÁ

TONY WIGHT GALLERY

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# INTRODUCTION

Paul Brewer

Diana Guerrero-Maciá ambitiously attempts to reconcile a proliferating number of hybrid conceptual strategies with a disciplinary precision that formally articulates an intimate knowledge of the entrenched positions defining the medium-specific histories of painting, sculpture, design, and craft. She succeeds by using the power of language as a means to construct universal statements that arise out of the idiosyncratic preoccupations that guide her tactics of appropriation. Disguised as fields of text and image recalling seemingly eccentric forms of concrete or haptic poetry, Guerrero-Maciá's material investigations of the visceral qualities of lush fabrics result in patchworks that slowly reveal themselves as tightly choreographed compositions guided by her fixation on various genealogies of popular culture.

Music, sports, fashion, entertainment, and literature are all fodder to be spliced into tangible sound bytes, which are then rendered graphically in such a manner that exploits the myriad permutations to which language is inevitably

subjected in the processes of reception and interpretation. With a distinct understanding of language as a dynamic matrix—especially its undeniable power to both inform and confound—Guerrero-Maciá pursues those instances where she can press incongruous, familiar, or even banal snippets into the realm of the transcendental. Focusing on messages and phrases from sources such as lyrics, press clippings, and colloquial speech, she rescues the specific elements piquing her interest and devotion by isolating and recontextualizing them in an anagrammatic process that resembles the sampling now ubiquitous to popular forms of electronic music.

The works gathered for *Devoured By Symbols* confront many of the idealistic pursuits consuming the history of painting—landscape, portraiture, grand narrative, the sublime, and abstraction—with a wit and humor that cleverly seesaws back and forth between adulatory homage and trenchant critique. The largest, and only work in the exhibition that does not directly integrate appropriated text, is perhaps most illustrative of

Guerrero-Maciá's playful condensation of multiple readings. *The Bigger Picture* breaks down the word "mountains" into letter blocks piled in repetition upon each other to form an impossible peak complete with a waterfall. Her rendition literally applies an elementary logic to what is perhaps the most iconic monumental landscape of painting, but it is by no means a hasty gesture. The deliberate choices of fonts, colors, and graphic arrangements, combined with the time and labor to physically sew the summit together, require a meditation that belies any notion of a flippant approach. In this sense, Guerrero-Maciá's tautological mountain appears to strive for the majesty of Albert Bierstadt's impossible Yosemite by privileging the scaffolding over the artifice in her production.

Reinterpretations of (in this particular case, German-born) American masters, however, is by no means an endgame for Guerrero-Maciá despite the fact that such an outlandish affinity is possible to grasp when viewing her work. The more immediate associations pull upon much more recent examples, including the polemical "statements" of Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, whose paintings—as dictionary descriptions of themselves—sparked a free-for-all between the sign, the signifier, and the signified, which has been hotly disputed up to

the present day. Or Lawrence Weiner's empirical observation's writ large on museum and gallery walls, striving for an objectivity that all but negated his own subjectivity. These uncanny examples from the 1960's coincided with a zeitgeist whose manifesto can easily be attributed now to Barthes' seminal *The Death of the Author* essay that was issued at a time when seemingly everything in the status quo could be treated as a belligerent object ripe for dismantling and rebuilding into something that was ultimately never able to overcome the sum of its original parts.

Guerrero-Maciá is part of a discernibly less idealistic but arguably more radical generation of artists who plunder the cultural contributions of both their ancestors and peers alike. It is a form of protest as celebration that treats culture almost as a type of genetic material rather than transferable property, thereby reanimating aging artifacts with new ideas in what has constituted, using Barthes' logic, a return of the living dead assault on the institutions and industries safeguarding authorship for commercial gain. Hybridity dominates this scavenged new terrain, making possible Guerrero-Maciá's conjunction of the Rolling Stones' psychedelic romantic fascinations with an historical treatise on the sublime by levitating the lyrics "coming colors in the air, oh ev'rywhere" into an appliquéd cloud formation in *Like a*

*Rainbow*. Guerrero-Maciá takes full advantage of the possibilities afforded artists by audiences now trained to treat the written word as a form of hypertext that can easily splinter into a maze of double meanings. In her hands, the melancholic meditations of the aging former lead singer of The Clash (Joe Strummer) are spun into a revolving constellation bounded by the verse “sometimes you can’t see a horizon...” in *The Tempest*.

With these and other examples, Guerrero-Maciá proves that acts of appropriation are more often than not forms of resurrection. Her indulgence takes the form of generosity by inflating fleeting bits of popular culture and parading them in new contexts designed to illuminate the universal values they represent. Ephemera is handled with the care of an archivist in her personal library and given material form by the act of stitching as a methodical and compulsive means to enact desire. With the open-endedness and nuance of language being conveyed by layers and textures of fabric and thread, Guerrero-Maciá is able to create works in which meaning and materiality are inseparable.

Paul Brewer is a writer, curator, and Director of The Project, NYC.

*The Bigger Picture*, 2008

Wool, vinyl, leather, and burlap on canvas, 72" x 64"



*Portrait for Hans Memling*, 2008  
Wool and vinyl on canvas, 22" x 24"



*The Tempest*, 2008

Wool and vinyl on canvas, 60" x 60"



SOMETIMES YOU CAN'T SEE A HORIZON



*Devoured by Symbols*, 2008  
Wool and vinyl on canvas, 66" x 56"





*Devoured by Symbols* (detail)

*Like a Rainbow*, 2008

Wool and vinyl on canvas, 60" x 70"



*Radiohead*, 2008

Wool and vinyl on canvas, 28" x 22"





*Sunset for the Union Jack*, 2008  
Wool and vinyl on canvas, 60" x 60"

A BLACK TINTED SUNSET WITH THE PRETTIEST OF SKIES



*The Diplomat*, 2008

Wool and vinyl on canvas, 66" x 56"



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*The Diplomat* (detail)

# ESSAY

Craig Drennen

Diana Guerrero-Maciá is an artist who looks at the pictorial and conceptual issues of painting through the lens of large-scale fabric collage. At first glance this seems perfectly reasonable. Didn't the Bauhaus aesthetic, after all, create a democratized field where textiles and painting could occupy the same discussion? And is it not also true that Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* helped mark the shift toward the acceptance of canvas as a painting support. It is also difficult to imagine the tenets of modernist self-referentiality without the warp and weft of the modernist grid. Yet until recently there has been a perceived distance between the discourse of contemporary painting and the tradition of fibers.

To complicate matters more, Guerrero-Maciá uses text in her work both as the carrier of a symbolic code and as an image in its own right. This suggests an enthusiasm toward conceptual art that has only recently become part of painting's accepted practice. Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* from 1434 includes the signature of the artist on the chamber's back wall as part of the statement "Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434" or "Jan van Eyck was here 1434." In other words, the text within the painting confirms and authenticates the legitimacy of the image. In 1929 Rene Magritte's

*The Treachery of Images* includes on its surface the infamous phrase "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." In this case the text seemingly refutes the image, or at the very least suggests a more complex relationship between text and image. The use of text in Western painting has tended to fall into one of these two camps; either providing added authority to an image or as a tactic to contradict images for ironic effect. The advent of conceptual art in the late 1960's, however, expanded the permissible effects and usages for text in a pictorial work. It is within the charged orbits of these three traditions—painting, fibers, and conceptual art—that Guerrero-Maciá situates her artistic practice.

In her latest exhibition, *Devoured by Symbols*, Guerrero-Maciá addresses painting's more reliable conduits to the sublime: the landscape and the portrait. And yet Guerrero-Maciá accesses this tradition not through the expected medium of painting, but through sewn collaged fabric. Roman carvers may well have preserved Greek accomplishment by producing marble copies of bronze originals, but not without simultaneously altering the terms by which the accomplishment would be judged. By the same token Guerrero-Maciá translates the issues of painting into



her personal form of aberrant appliqué, where pictures are constructed from sewn pieces of cut cloth with raw edges. The result is a hybrid form wherein the pictorial package of painting is made known through an entirely new formal vocabulary of stitched fabric, a vocabulary that places new requirements on the artist's hand as well as the viewers' perception. In fact, the modular regularity of the stitched thread provides a stabilizing tempo in each piece. Every shape in every work is, by necessity, outlined with the discreet staccato line quality of the sewing, which turns out to be such a simple but satisfying formal device it seems a wonder that more traditional painters have not adopted it.

In *The Bigger Picture*, the largest stretched piece in the exhibition, Guerrero-Maciá operates a bit like a concrete poet, creating a visual mountain out of the letters that comprise the word "mountains." The result is a steep silhouette made from combinations of familiar fonts, for a visual impression that is both majestic and intimate, both far-away and as perceptually near at hand as an open page. The source text comes from a postcard the artist mailed to herself after a visit to South America. It is perhaps worth tracing the trajectory of *The Bigger Picture* from the artist's on-site experience of overwhelming natural phenomena, writ small on a postcard note to herself which she receives upon her return home to re-assemble into grand, albeit written, form. The mountain of "mountains" has within it a central axis of blue representing a cascade of mountain spring water. A dramatic "X" overlays a plateau on the right side of the mountain. It can be read as a negation, or simply as a unifying formal gesture

across an expanse of disparate items, a painterly technique favored by Rauschenberg in his flatbed-style paintings. Yet the speed and machismo of the abstract expressionist gesture is reduced to domesticated slow motion via hand-stitched fabric collage.

The sublime landscape theme is continued in a series of medium-scale stretched pieces. *The Tempest* is a square containing layers of concentric circles surrounded by a ring of text stating, "sometimes you can't see the horizon." The format is reminiscent of swirling discs of Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* while the text is lifted from Joe Strummer lyrics. The concentric circles punctuated by tiny yellow daisies might read as an orbital model or an illustration of sound waves. *Sunset For the Union Jack*, is a square utilizing a similar composition with cut red shapes on a white ground that are less diagrammatic and closer to a Matisse paper cutout. The outer perimeter is formed by the words "there is a black tinted sunset with the prettiest of skies" from a Palace Brothers song. The reductive rigor of the interior circles is given a decorative sprinkling of six flowers, two orange arcs, and cascading strips of pink cloth. The third piece in this group, *Like a Rainbow*, begins with an austere pale canvas with the phrase "coming colors in the air, oh everywhere" from the Rolling Stones song referenced in the title. The letters are arranged into an oval cloud and seem to accept rays of light from the top of the piece before refracting them out into a resplendent, albeit scientifically incorrect, rainbow at the bottom. This group of work houses a loaded range of referents—storms, sunsets, horizons, rainbows, and flags—presented

not in iconic images but through the symbolic presentation of language. The subjects' high drama is leavened by the Guerrero-Maciá's subjective palette, her reliance on carnivalesque fonts, and the kitsch familiarity of flowers and stars.

Two stretched pieces point toward the tradition of portraiture, while also utilizing the formal language of conceptual art the most directly. *Portrait for Hans Memling* honors the 15th-century Flemish painter with an incomplete black-and-white harlequin pattern onto which the phrase "Blank Beauty" is sewn in two different fonts. "Blank" is in lavender cursive text while "Beauty" stands out in white Helvetica. The term "blank beauty" was used by Holland Cotter to describe the subjects of Memling's portraits. In *Radiohead*, the words, "broad looming & non-specific" emerge from a black background, each word a different scale and color. The large X recurs to partially obscure the words, and a single flower. This phrase is pulled from a published review, but this time for the band Radiohead. The enigmatic phrase is as much a "portrait" of Radiohead as "blank beauty" was of Memling. It is very easy to assume an equivalency between the two, wherein critics make aphoristic commentary on cultural producers. Yet in Guerrero-Maciá's hand the equivalency does not seem cynical, merely descriptive of a changed historic condition. In a media-saturated world, we are what is said about us. If nothing is said, written, or published, it becomes very difficult to maintain even a modicum of cultural currency. And what's true for Radiohead is also true for Memling—and for the rest of us.

Two large unstretched pieces mark a somewhat different direction for Guerrero-Maciá. *Devoured by Symbols* gives the exhibition its title and is a dark unstretched banner. The verb in the title is embodied in a comically aggressive white lion that advances toward viewers from beneath a draped blue victory ribbon, with its icy blue eyes and one gold incisor. The lion's outstretched left forepaw projects a rainbow extending beyond the rectangular boundary and onto the floor. The words "fancy that" are scattered and interspersed with flowers and stars so as to reduce legibility. *The Diplomat* becomes even more perverse. The victory ribbon in *Devoured by Symbols* now reads as yellow smile complete with daisies for eyes. The phrase "yeah, right" is obfuscated by decorative elements and a cartwheeling clown. The lower portion looks to be the converging orthogonal lines of a floor in one-point perspective, or a set of wildly enlarged piano keys. The result in both works is a politically charged pastiche of detached signifiers that do not immediately combine into a traditional meaning package, but rather constantly configure and re-configure right before our eyes.

What radicalizes all of Guerrero-Maciá's work may be the way she re-attaches mediated text and imagery to her own subjectivity. One of the initial problems of capitalism noted by Marx was the loosened connection workers had to the commodities they produced, while simultaneously severing from consumers all connection to the labor involved in production. Guerrero-Maciá demonstrates a corrective measure by plucking references from across media and art history, then subjecting those references to her artisanal studio

practice that embodies every element, whether pop song or modernist shape, with a renewed aura.

Or perhaps the lasting impact of Guerrero-Maciá's work is her refusal to accept the entrenched "either/or" binaries circulating throughout culture. She does not have to choose painting or fibers, when she can have command of both. She does not have to choose between formal severity or kitsch playfulness when she harnesses the best qualities of both. And she does not have to segregate those aspects of her work that are personal from those that are cultural. It is clear that the culture is within her (whether early Renaissance portraiture or The Clash songbook) at the same time that she is producing within it.

Guerrero-Maciá's exhibition arrives at a time when a great deal of work has been done to close the gap between painting and fibers, led in part by Mike Kelley, Ghada Amer, and Cosi von Bonin. *Devoured by Symbols* proves that Guerrero-Maciá is ready to provide a new chapter of her own.

Craig Drennen is an artist based in Savannah, GA.



*After Some Time*, 2008

Set of 6 prints on paper, 17 ½" x 12 ½"

Edition of 20

A collaborative print project between Ken Botnick and Diana Guerrero-Maciá, using letterpress and inkjet printing.

"Everywhere you look in India visible language is present in magnificent and complex word/image relationships. Our objective in using text found on Indian signs, and re-contextualizing them in these prints, was to capture some of the subtle complexity of language usage in modern, post-colonial India as it passes from written to spoken and then back to written English. We also delighted, as the Indian sign-painters do, in the play between visual form of letters and words and the impact form has on meaning in the mind of the reader."

Ken Botnick has been printing and publishing works in limited edition for over 25 years, first as co-proprietor of Red Ozier Press in New York, and today under the imprint emdash in St. Louis. His work is found in collections around the world, including The Getty Center for Humanities, The Bodleian Library, The Newberry Library, the Yale Arts of the Book Collection, libraries at Smith, Harvard, Wellesley and notable private collections. The Red Ozier Press archive is part of the permanent collection of The New York Public Library. Botnick was the recipient of a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship in 2006 to support his residency at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India. His most current book, *Kamini*, selections from the *Gitagovinda*, published in Sanskrit and English was selected by the American Institute of Graphic Arts for its "50 Books/50 Covers" exhibit, 2007. He is Professor of Art at Washington University in St. Louis where he directs the Kranzberg Book Studio.

# BIOGRAPHY

Cuban-American, b. 1966  
Lives and works in Chicago

## EDUCATION

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

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008 *Devoured By Symbols*, Tony Wight Gallery, Chicago  
2006 *Words Make Wide Open Spaces*, Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery, Chicago  
2005 Artpace, San Antonio, Hudson (Show)Room, San Antonio, TX  
2003 *My First Painting, Twenty-one Years Later*, 12 x 12: New Artists New Work – Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
2003 *This Cowboy Nation*, Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery, Chicago  
2000 *Perfect Lovers*, Museum of Contemporary Art Saint Louis, St. Louis, MO

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 *Loaded: Hunting Culture in America*, Glass Curtain Gallery, Chicago  
2008 *On The Road*, in conjunction with Jack Kerouac's Scroll, A + D Gallery, Chicago  
2008 *Three*, Traywick Contemporary, Berkeley, CA  
2007 *Collected Visions and Contemporary Works*, Pera Museum, Istanbul, Turkey (catalogue)  
2007 *Direct*, Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery, Chicago  
2007 *Making Peace*, Three Walls, Chicago (catalogue)  
2007 *Rise and Set* (collaboration with Ken Fandell), Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago  
2007 *Fast Forward*, Rockford Museum of Art, Rockford, IL  
2007 *Changing Cities*, Museum of New Art, Detroit  
2007 *Go-Between*, devening projects + editions, Chicago  
2007 *Midwest Biennial*, DePauw University Museum, Greencastle, IN  
2006 *The World Is Round*, Public Art Fund, Metrotech Center, Brooklyn, NY (catalogue)  
2006 *Wallworks 2*, Traywick Contemporary, Oakland, CA

2006 *Leaving Aztlán: Art in a Post-Chicano Age*, ARENA, Santa Monica, CA, Center for Contemporary Art, Denver, CO (traveling)  
2006 *Group Show*, Bodybuilder & Sportsman, Chicago  
2004 *Summer Show*, Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery, Chicago  
2003 *Color Value*, Gallery 400, University of Illinois, Chicago  
2003 *The Big Picture Show: Size Does Matter*, Betty Rymer Gallery, Chicago  
2002 *Cheap*, White Columns, New York (traveling)  
2002 *Just What It Says*, Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery, Chicago  
2002 *Hobby Lobby*, Gallery 312, Chicago  
2002 *Blue Blood Blue Collar*, Heaven Gallery, Chicago  
2002 *Prestar = borrow + lend*, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago  
2001 *Chicago and Vicinity with a Bias*, Klein Art Works, Chicago (catalogue)  
2001 *Fluid Interfaces*, Gallery 2, Chicago  
2000 *Soap Number Three*, No Name Exhibitions at The Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN

## AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

2009 Senior Resident, Oregon College of Arts & Crafts, Portland, OR  
2008 Penland School of Craft, Letterpress Residency, Penland, NC  
2007 Public Art Fund, New York City, Commission  
2007 Finalist, Paris Metro Station Public Art Commission, Paris, France

2006 Public Art Commission, McCormick Place, Chicago  
2004 Macdowell Colony Fellowship  
2001 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award  
1998 Macdowell Colony Fellowship  
1992 Phillip Morris Foundation Graduate Fellowship

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2007 Wall Street Journal, Europe, November.  
2006 Camper, Fred. "The Modern Sampler," Chicago Reader. March 10.  
2006 Artner, Alan. Art Review, Chicago Tribune. March 3.  
2005 Paglia, Michael. "Nuevo and Improved," Westword, westword.com. Volume 28, No. 23. April 14.  
2005 Motian-Meadows, Mary, "Rethinking Contemporary Latino Art," Spectrum, Volume 19, No. 1, April.  
2005 "Challenging Stereo-Types," Southwest Art, April, p. 106-109.  
2005 Rodriguez, Cindy. "Art Helps Us Understand Each Other," The Denver Post. March 1.  
2005 Chandler, Mary Voelz. "Global Context," Rocky Mountain News. February 24.  
2000 Abbe, Mary. "Under One Big Top [No Name Exhibitions]," Star Tribune. August 4.









