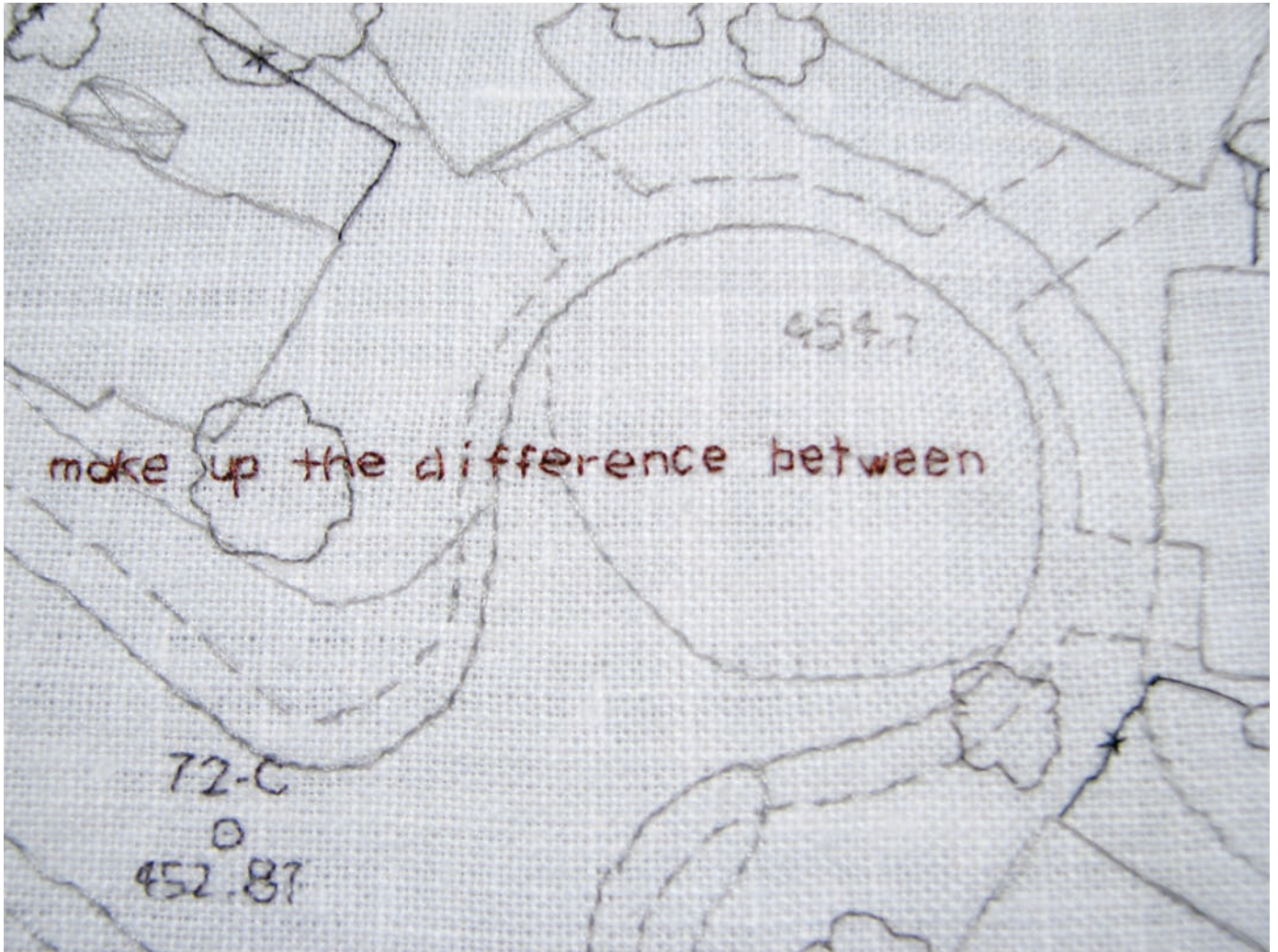


HEATHER JOHNSON

degrees of separation



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

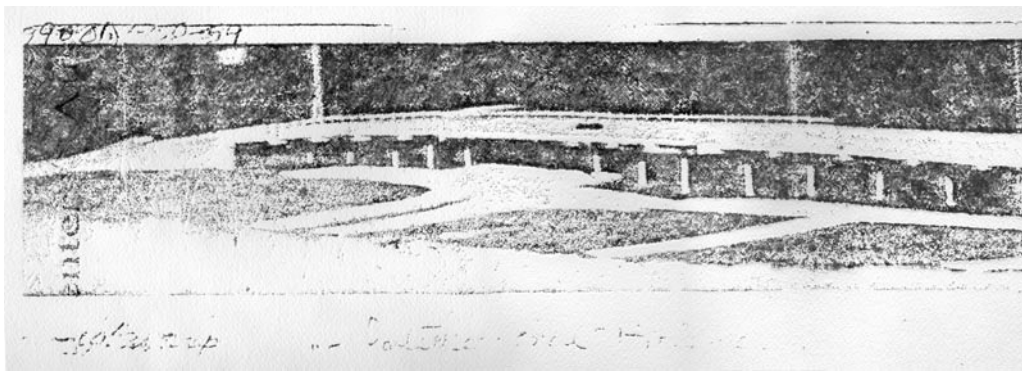
NOVEMBER 18 - DECEMBER 23, 2006

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Legend has it that John Lennon fell in love with Yoko Ono the instant he saw *Ceiling Painting*, her 1966 piece in a show in London. Walking up a ladder and looking towards the sky, he encountered only the tiny letters that spelled the word, 'yes'. Was it the act of affirmation? The gentle nudge towards heaven? The wry reward for climbing the ladder? The irony that though he received this word personally, it was actually meant for everyone? This incident had left an imprint in my mind as one of the rare works in art history that is at once personal and universal. It seemed to me that this work also expressed a position or a location, a place to stand or a place to take a stand.

I was reminded of this notion when walking through Heather Johnson's installation at *Women & Their Work*. Like the aforementioned Ono piece, Johnson took great pains to create an installation that physically moves the visitor around to specific spots, to this very private place. Texts or phrases populate the gallery as well as the 'non-art' related areas such as the bathroom and the gallery shop, creating an atmosphere of simultaneity. Actually, the phrases are a collection of voices – her voice as well as voices heard by eavesdropping in public spaces. In some cases these are snippets of private conversations dealing with relationships, longing or leaving, in other cases they exclaim imperatives such as "gimme that!" Every now and again, fragments of these phrases belie meaning and just hang in mid-air like dumb weather balloons, as in "She—uh—he was". This intentional mélange of words, incomplete sentences, banalities, whispers and yells is Johnson's subtle way of dissolving the tools of meaning into abstract code (just as saying a word ten times renders it into pure sound). Though there is no underlying or coherent narrative, there is a kind of spectrum or passage to follow from the personal intimation to abstraction or from orientation to disorientation.



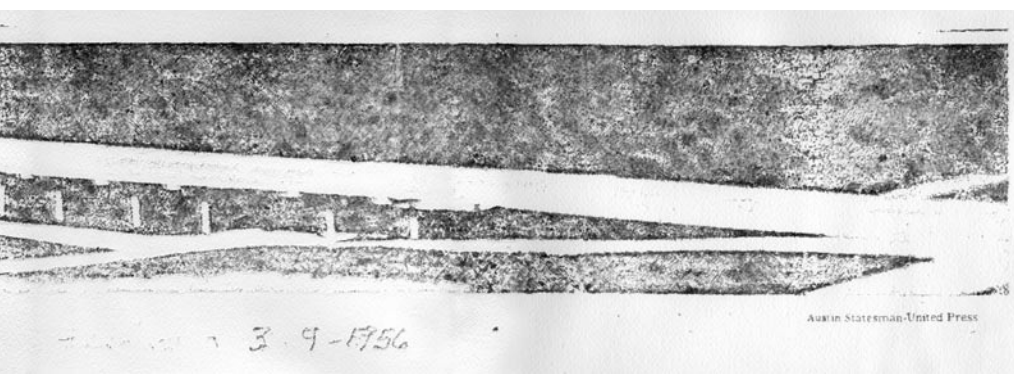
East-West, 2006. Graphite on paper. 15" x 45".

These fragments of text are found punctuating embroidered maps and diagrams, transferred onto the wall, onto paper, and adhered to the gallery floor, so that you are constantly reading up and down the topology of the gallery with great scrutiny. Suddenly the gallery floor is transformed into archipelagos of thoughts and expressions made visible by spills and stains from former shows. A coalescence of an environmental and linguistic geography is clearly in the making.

Two interactive installations included in this show take the viewer to the extremes of this spectrum; one called *Parting Gifts* is a series of colored string-works placed innocuously under freeway underpasses in two different parts of Austin. Freeways are a constant source of fascination and repulsion for Johnson and figure prominently in many of her works as much for their formal beauty as for their forceful reorientation of the civic environment. The works are to be found or discovered through the use of postcards placed in the room next to a video of Johnson venturing out to make the piece. The areas chosen are significant in that they represent Austin's oft-used freeway junctures, yet actual placement of the works are in spots where one would have to actually get out of the car and walk to them. The other installation is called *landscape* and is a small room in the gallery filled with various maps that the artist had shred, as well as texts on the wall. Included here is equipment for visitors to shred their own maps and snippets of text fragments provided in a glass bowl—

available to visitors to re-enact the artists' drawing process. Transferring the authorship, she asks the viewer to empathize with the process and interiorize it. In both cases, the visitor is asked to follow the artist's footsteps – one set leading towards a specific interiority and another leading out into rootlessness, towards the generic urban landscape.

This confluence of public/private space relates closely to another ambitious project Johnson has become known for over the past few years in Austin, called *Cracks in the Pavement: Gifts in the Urban Landscape*. *Cracks in the Pavement* was a project for public spaces throughout Austin and in other parts of the world such as London. Artists were invited to place objects around the city, traversing past the usual familiar routes into interstitial zones like freeway underpasses, grassy medians, back alleys – literally the fissures of the cityscape. Visitors would then log onto the website and locate the objects through a map and a photograph of the site. Once found, the visitor was able to hold onto the object, and/or if not found, relay his/her experience of that particular place on the online guestbook. Though *Cracks in the Pavement* was a public art project, it was closer to a very private art experience. Not only because it operated under the radar of typical public art commissions, but also because it allowed visitors to keep the work at the end (private consumption without purchase). It was a generous statement in that art was made here as a gift to someone (anyone) rather than as a commodity. Much like *Parting Gifts*,



Cracks in the Pavement was in itself a gift from the artist to a city she was stumbling to get to know more intimately.

Johnson's reflection on place and self-articulation in the generic urban environment also invokes cultural discourses and practices that have been gaining greater urgency in architecture, art and urban planning for at least a decade now. Namely, the early ideas of 'psycho geography,' a moniker used by Guy Debord and the Situationists in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Debord, psycho geography is "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."¹ For Debord, these theories underlined the basis for politicized actions, public projects, films and writings aimed against a growing conformism in bourgeois society. In recent decades, architects from Bernard Tschumi to Rem Koolhaas have considered, critiqued and furthered the utopian project of Debord's vision both in practice and in theory. Drawings and particularly diagrams have played a central role in articulating these 'ambient spaces' and have become an ideal instrument for conceptual proposals for the lived environment. Succinct, abstract and reductive, a diagram is "both specific, in that it precisely maps the space of individual confinement, and universal in that it (imprecisely) refers to an entire social regime."² Johnson's embroidered freeways, diagrams, and shredded maps, are self-conscious of the ideas of psycho geography, yet in her

case, they pursue the idea through a specific investment of the body.

In one of her most elaborate works in the show, Johnson embroiders a map of a road as it cuts through a suburban area, revealing the social and geographic differences that fall on either side of it. In this piece, *don't know where I'm going, but I know where I've been*, sentient thoughts and voices emerge from the sprawling hills on one side and the lots and cul-de-sacs on the other. Voices that speak of disenfranchisement, disconnection and disorientation meet renegade dots, dashes and arrows that sometimes pull thoughts together, while other times hang in blank space or point to nothing in particular. Divorced from their usual function, Johnson creates the awareness of how reliant we are on these symbols for meaning, clarity and direction. Blank areas become charged even further with vague emotional tremor, and like the surrounding white walls of the gallery, they hold together the intertextuality of the works. Reading these, one slowly arrives at the sense of the painstaking labor involved in depicting the details. The stitching – meticulous, insistent, impossibly tiny at times, pierces the fabric so that it seems more like a skin that has been pin-pricked by acupuncture needles. The entire piece could easily be a map of the body with the pressure points highlighted.

Embroidery, a practice that Johnson has been adept at for years now, is used here as a method of defiance. In this vein, she shares her position with many contemporary artists

who have chosen this traditional medium towards similar ends. Artists like Felix Gonzales-Torrez, Elaine Reichek, Leonilson, Ghada Amer and many others have utilized embroidered text not only as a subtle subversion of the medium's traditionally decorative function, but also as a provocative or politicized act of transgression. Embroidery in this contemporary context becomes about personalizing the political, investing the body (the hand, the voice) into a discussion about gender, the disenfranchised, and the marginal. At the same time, some of the traditional values of embroidery, always having been about slowness and feminine works of devotion are maximized here in counterpart to the traditionally male-dominated formats depicted, such as the plans, maps, diagrams – and all other graphic schemas used for hierarchy and control.

Other instances in which the body appears surreptitiously are in the small diagrammatic embroidered renderings of vague industrial and mechanical parts. Outlined with surgical accuracy, these diagrams do not indicate specific usage, but their technical language does seem to point to a breakdown in communication coupling terms such as "Dead Load Reaction" or "Joint Restraint" with "cause I can't wait forever." The mechanical device in question seems exposed and vulnerable, as if we are privy to its inner workings and flaws. Johnson's hand is also the culprit behind her many drawings or re-tracings of 2nd generation newspaper articles and documents (re-tracings of photocopies) depicting urban plans and construction works in process. Executed with startling realism (so much so that they look like old authentic prints) Johnson captures not just the facsimile of the document, but in some cases magnifies the moments of indecision with awkward edits and amendments left on the page. Again, her interest here is focused in the fissures, in this case by slowing down the process of consuming the image. In

re-drawing these usually mass-produced images of 'progress' and 'development' along with their age-marks and photocopy dots, she produces a different time zone for them in which we may closely observe their material and conceptual degradation. This enables us to see how dated the past's view of the future is, or in her words "see the progress of something about to devastate the environment."³

It is no accident that Johnson's work has some resonance with Yoko Ono's early fluxus work. Fluxus ideas about art as ephemeral material or as anonymous readymades to be given and especially ideas about democratic means of collective production have continued to resonate with several contemporary artists of her generation from the West Coast, such as Harrell Fletcher for instance. Johnson, like Fletcher, attended the California College of Arts & Crafts (now California College of the Arts or CCA) in San Francisco in the '90s, which was instrumental to the sustenance of these ideas. Although many of Johnson's map works originated in San Francisco, they were expanded upon in Austin, where she found herself in a state of productive displacement. During her three-year sojourn in Austin, her ideas relating to place, site-specificity and collective production found affinity with communities such as the Land Arts program at the Design Department of the University of Texas at Austin, where Professor Chris Taylor had been nourishing similar ideas and practices with his students. Fortunately for Johnson and for Austin, this context provided her with the initiative to forge an ambitious, city-wide project such as *Cracks in the Pavement*, engaging artists here in ways that had not happened before. It's been heartening to watch an artist such as Johnson, rootless as she is, come through a town and leave behind her a very personal mark of critical practice on the place.

Regine Basha
November, 2006

¹ *Introduction To A Critique of Urban Geography* by Guy Debord.
Published in *Les Levres Nues* #6, 1955.

² *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architecture from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*. Ed. Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley. The Drawing Center, New York, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Pg. 86.

³ Taken from a conversation with the artist on November 19, 2006.

HEATHER JOHNSON

EDUCATION

- 2001 Master of Fine Arts, California College of Arts & Crafts, San Francisco, CA.
1994 Bachelor of Arts in Visual and Performing Arts, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD. Magna cum laude.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 *degrees of separation*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX. Brochure. *Plumb*, The Donkey Show at Motel 3, Contemporary Art Month, San Antonio, TX.
2003 *Your Space*, Patrick Gallery, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC.
2002 *Telling Time by Remote Control*, Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco, CA.
2001 *Pictures from Basements*, New Nothing Cinema, San Francisco, CA.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 *Drawing Inside/Out*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.
The Floating Chair, CSC, Austin, TX.
2005 *Temporary Dividers*, Ars Ipsa / CSC, Austin, TX.
Stitch in Time, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.
22 to Watch: New Art in Austin, Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX. Traveled to Galveston Art Center & Dallas Contemporary. Catalog.
Somewhere Outside It, Schroeder Romero, Brooklyn, NY.
Small Works, Paul Sunderholm Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
2004 *Connect-the-Dots*, LeRoy Neiman Gallery, Columbia University, New York, NY.
Closer In, Contemporary Artists Center, North Adams, MA. Catalog.
Draw_Drawing, Gallery 32, London, England. Presented as part of *London Biennale 2004*.
Workshop_A102004, Area 10, London, England.
Score: Action Drawing, White Columns, New York, NY.
2003 *Response*, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC. CD-rom catalog.
Crossing Bridges, The Contemporary Jewish Museum at CBS MarketWatch, San Francisco, CA.
Mark: Contemporary Drawings, Gallery 16, San Francisco, CA.
Accumulated Actions, Sonoma Museum of Visual Art, Santa Rosa, CA.
2002 *Cozy*, Spanganga, San Francisco, CA.
Delicate Surprise, Room Space, Gentilly, France.
Same/Difference, SF Camerawork at Hotel Triton, San Francisco, CA.
2001 *Never Underestimate the Power of a Drawing*, Refusalon, San Francisco, CA.
Trace, Ampersand International Arts, San Francisco, CA.
2000 *Young Portfolios 1999*, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts, Kiyosato, Yamanashi, Japan.
1999 *Tender*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA.

CURATED EXHIBITIONS/PROJECTS

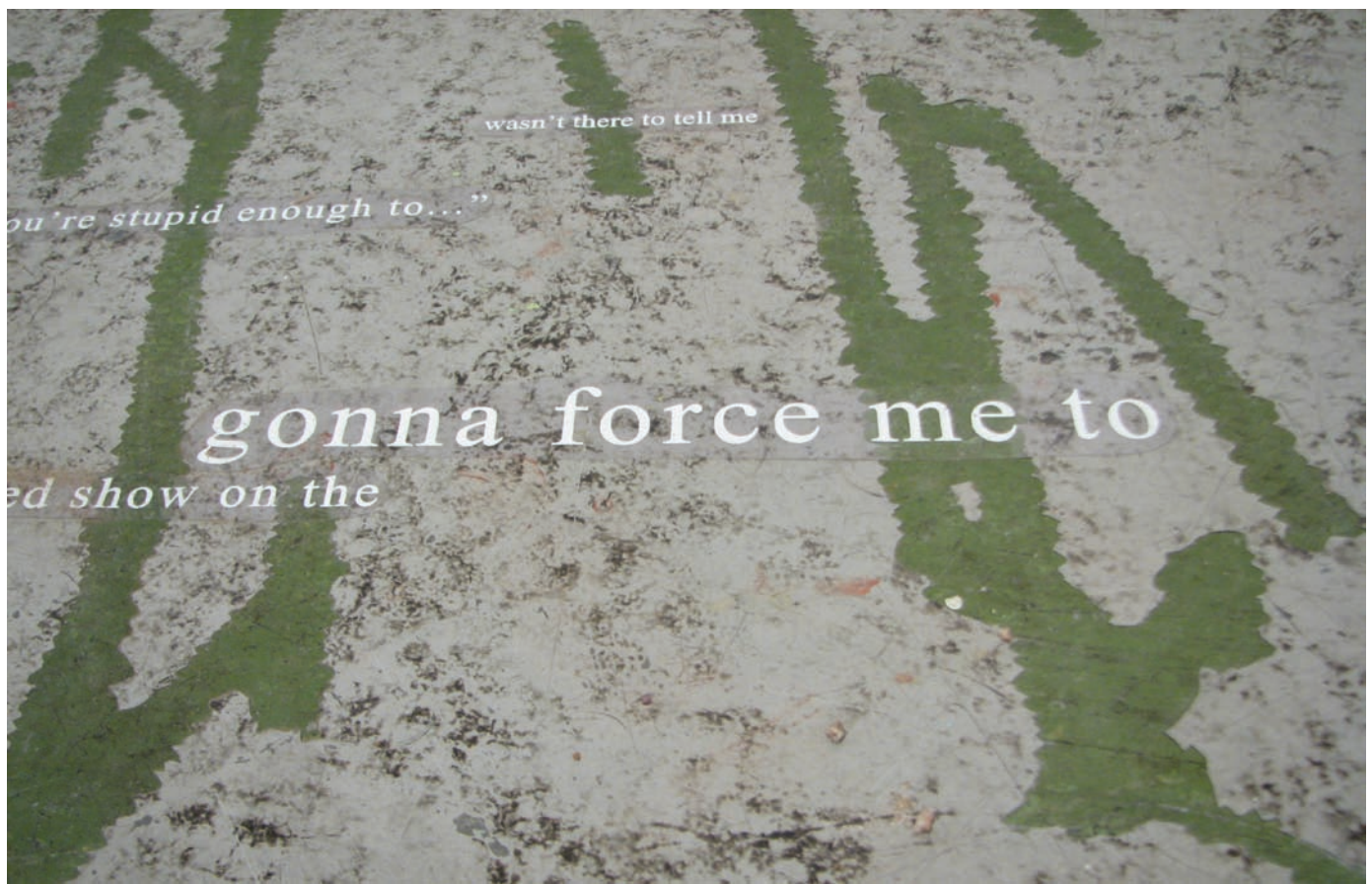
- 2005 *Cracks in the Pavement: Gifts in the Urban Landscape*: in locations around the world. <http://cracksinthepavement.com/>
2004 *Cracks in the Pavement: Gifts in the Urban Landscape*, Austin, TX and London, UK. <http://cracksinthepavement.com/>
2000 *Interaha*, Crucible Steel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
1999 *Marked Territories*, Crucible Steel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
American American, Crucible Steel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.
1998 *Inside the Visible*, Crucible Steel Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

AWARDS/RESIDENCIES

- 2005 ArtPace 2007 International Residency Program shortlist.
"Austin Critic's Table Award," *Cracks in the Pavement: Gifts in the Urban Landscape*.
2003 Artist in Residence, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC.



This Panel: *blue-orange*, detail, September 2006. Site-specific installation. Embroidery floss, adhesive.
Cover Panel: *don't know where I'm going, but I know where I've been*, detail, 2005-2006. Thread on linen. 6' x 2'.



degrees of separation, detail, 2006. Installation on floor of Women & Their Work.

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 28th anniversary. It presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,781 artists in 242 visual art exhibitions, 103 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 306 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant

in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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